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## **Rail freight service to return in 2008**

### **State approves \$13.6 million to repair Napa-Willits stretch of Northwestern Pacific Railroad**

By STEVE HART  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The state on Thursday approved \$13.6 million for the last phase of repairs to a 60-mile stretch of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad, setting the stage for a return of freight service to Sonoma County next year. Work on bridges and the roadbed should begin in late August, said Mitch Stogner, director of the North Coast Railroad Authority, which controls the freight line.

The California Transportation Commission authorized the funding at a meeting in Glendale. It will use money from the state's gasoline tax.

Freight service should resume next spring on the southern segment of the railroad between Napa and Windsor, Stogner said.

Earlier this year, the commission approved \$9.5 million to repair 54 signal crossings on the route. That work will begin within two weeks, he said.

Cargo service was halted in 2001, when federal rail authorities ruled the line didn't meet minimum safety standards. The historic 316-mile route between Napa and Eureka has been plagued by flood, fire and neglect, with trains running only sporadically since Southern Pacific Co. tried to abandon it in the early 1980s.

The railroad authority was created by state lawmakers in 1989 to keep it open as a transportation alternative to Highway 101. Last year, the authority approved a contract with a private company, NWP Co., to operate trains when the line reopens.

Sonoma County shippers have expressed strong interest in using the railroad when service is restored, said John Williams, NWP president. Many bulk shippers now use trucks to transport products to Napa, where they are loaded on trains for shipment across the country, he said.

"Everybody on the NWP who's still using rail is very eager to have rail come back to their own facilities," he said. Rail costs average 25 percent less than trucking, according to Williams. NWP has been meeting with wood producers, dairy companies, aggregate shippers, wineries and other potential customers, he said.

NWP also is in talks with Sonoma County about shipping its garbage by rail to out-of-county disposal sites, he said. The county has been exporting its trash by truck ever since its landfill closed in 2005.

"So far, we've had a good reception from the county," Williams said. "But we're only one alternative."

The stretch of railroad from Windsor to Willits is scheduled to open by the end of 2008. There's no firm timeline for restoring the heavily damaged route from Willits to Eureka.

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