

Sierra Club Toiyabe Chapter Resolution in Support of “Solutionary Rail”

Adopted by the Toiyabe Chapter Executive Committee, February 5, 2021

WHEREAS, rail transportation is one of the most energy efficient, least environmentally disruptive, and safest form of transportation known to humanity; and

WHEREAS, the potential of rail is being advanced worldwide in numerous countries, with billions of dollars already invested and countless more earmarked for new alignments, advanced signaling, multiple tracking, higher speeds, and electrification for both freight and passenger; and

WHEREAS, the current dominant modes of motorized transport in the U.S. (cars and planes for passengers; trucks for freight) are highly inefficient and environmentally destructive compared to rail; and

WHEREAS, many citizens and policymakers of all political persuasions agree that a massive investment in the nation’s infrastructure is needed to secure a safe, healthy, and prosperous future for all Americans; and

WHEREAS the *Solutionary Rail* concept advances a proposal to electrify America’s railroads and open rail corridors for use in renewable energy transmission, while creating thousands of good union jobs in both rural and urban areas, spurring economic growth and sustainable development; and

WHEREAS, developing a political consensus on solutions to climate change and its accompanying devastating effects on our economies, lives, and environment has been proven to be a challenging task; and

WHEREAS, *Solutionary Rail* offers a win-win proposal that has the potential to build the political consensus necessary to overcome political deadlock by benefitting numerous stakeholders, among them rail workers and the rail industry; urban and rural communities; green energy developers and rural electric co-ops; farmers, ranchers, and tribes; trackside and hub-side communities, shippers, motorists, and passengers; and

WHEREAS, such a historic infrastructure investment project has the potential to bridge the urban-rural divide, help heal the nation’s political divisions, deliver tangible benefits to both “red” states and “blue” states from coast-to-coast, and unite the nation, reimagining the creation of the first Transcontinental Railroad 150 years ago with a new focus on equity, human rights, and sustainability; and

WHEREAS, mainstay railroad shipments of fossil fuels have been in a state of decline, a trend that will continue as the nation moves towards renewable energy, freeing up track capacity for high value freight that can be diverted from highway to rail; and

WHEREAS, rail transport - unique among long-distance heavy transportation modes – has the ability to replace its current fossil fuel propulsion with electric propulsion which can be generated from renewable sources; and

WHEREAS, rail line electrification can also be leveraged to build transmission lines to bring presently remote solar and wind produced energy to metropolitan markets; and

WHEREAS, the *Solutionary Rail* strategy of building an electrified, multiple tracked, higher speed and more robust national rail network would:

-- reduce the railroads' reliance on fossil fuel shipments, while dramatically reducing overall fossil fuel use by moving freight and passengers off of the nation's highways; and

-- open the way to reduce fossil-based electricity by facilitating the transmission of renewable energy from rural generation infrastructure to urban markets; and

-- create a public-private partnership with railroads that could serve as the basis for improved working conditions for rail workers and improved air quality for impacted communities as well as the renegotiation of track easements across tribal lands.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that Sierra Club Toiyabe Chapter supports the *Solutionary Rail* proposal for a national network of high capacity, higher speed, multiple-tracked, electrified railroad trunk lines nationwide, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we urge other Club Chapters to likewise support rail electrification leading to endorsement of renewable energy and electrified rail corridors by the Sierra Club as a whole; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that we call on Governor Sisolak to direct the Nevada State Department of Transportation and other appropriate state agencies to evaluate *Solutionary Rail* feasibility and to bring the general concept of rail corridor electrification, powered by renewable energy, into the set of sustainable transportation strategies for our transportation system in Nevada.

Supporting Data , References

“Solutionary Rail” [LINK](#) is a grassroots campaign to electrify US railroads and open rail corridors for renewable energy transmission. The organization is “building an unconventional alliance to deliver win/win solutions for a just transition to a decarbonized energy and transportation infrastructure.”

The Washington State Chapter of the Sierra Club has passed a Chapter resolution supporting Solutionary Rail. In a 2018 article in their Chapter newsletter, Tim Gould, chair of the Washington State Sierra Club transportation and land use committee, writes, “Combining electrical transmission capacity in rail corridors with electrified train propulsion would enable wind energy resources to reach larger population centers, and thus replace retired coal power such as the Colstrip plant. Multi-state support could

finance a public utility-like ownership for the new infrastructure, guaranteeing long term benefits.”

Description of Club Policy (or references):

Here is an excerpt from the National Sierra Club transportation policy. Sections particularly relevant to this resolution are **in red**

[Guidelines Adopted by the Transportation Committee](#)

Transportation is the highest source of U.S. CO2 emissions. Additionally, oil use in the transportation sector causes or exacerbates serious health conditions such as asthma, heart disease, and cancer. **Sierra Club’s goal is to cut U.S. oil use in half by 2030. Sierra Club’s priority strategies to slash emissions from the transportation sector are:**

Cars, buses, trucks, and trains are increasingly powered by renewable electricity.

Fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks are strong, with advanced design, materials and technologies (including electrification).

Operating practices are efficient: Improve driver behavior, logistics for long-haul trucks and ships, and **lower carbon mode-shifting (freight to rail, jet passengers to high-speed rail, etc.).**

Promote alternative modes of transportation by encouraging compact mixed-use land use patterns that prioritize walking and biking over vehicles, **building and supporting public transit**, reducing and eventually eliminating parking, encouraging shared vehicle use, telecommuting/flexible working hours, and using pricing and other incentives to equitably promote alternatives to driving.

Access to clean transportation solutions, such as walking, transit, biking, electric vehicles, autonomous vehicles, and electric vehicle charging should be distributed equitably throughout communities and neighborhoods. All strategies or policies that are adopted must be firmly rooted in the Jemez Principles as well as protect natural systems and open space, reduce vehicle miles traveled, and promote environmental and economic justice and access for all, including low-income communities and those most impacted by pollution.

Counter-Arguments and Response

- *Advocating for electrified intercity passenger rail has never been a priority of the Toiyabe Chapter. Why start now?*
 - Addressing climate change IS a top priority of both the national Sierra Club and the Toiyabe Chapter. Our current transportation system is now the leading contributor to greenhouse gases, so advocating for a mode-shift away from gas-powered vehicles to electrified rail is a part of that top priority.

- Moreover, Nevada already has many existing, important intercity rail lines that currently are mostly used for freight, with some (poorly funded) Amtrak passenger rail. As our electrical power system is shifting rapidly away from coal, and hauling coal has been for many years a staple freight for the railroads, there will be space not only for different types of trains and loads, but also for a different way of thinking about how to use our existing rail lines. Located as we are in Nevada, a state traversed by those rail lines, we are in a position to contribute to that discussion and advocacy.
- *Does the Chapter have the capacity to work on this?*
 - We already have a “home” for this work in the Transportation Committee, and we have Jasmine, a Clean Transportation for All organizer. We also have several volunteers who wish to advocate for passenger rail.

Funds Requested and Budget: None

Chapter Commitment Required

The Toiyabe Chapter already has a Rail sub-team of its Transportation team. We expect that this resolution would both add to the “ammunition” that team can use in advocating for electrified intercity passenger rail, and also give it an organizing structure for that advocacy, including relationships with other advocacy organizations, FAQ’s, and presentation tools. We ask that the members of the Rail subteam and the Transportation team become familiar with these Solutionary Rail materials to help their advocacy - so some study and time commitment on the part of staff and volunteers would be required. We also ask that the Chapter Director and the Communications team help educate our members and supporters about the Solutionary Rail concept in particular, and about the benefits of electrified intercity passenger rail in general.

Next Steps

See previous section.