

# Op-Ed On Railroad Connection

*By Senator John Cowdery*

Sometimes, bigger is better. The proposed Alaska Highway natural gas pipeline is a big project. Building a railroad to connect Alaska with the rest of North America is equally ambitious.

Quite possibly, the only way to get the pipeline built is to complete the thousand or so mile railroad connection to British Columbia first, or perhaps construct both projects at the same time. This would be a mega-project all right – but one that is certainly feasible and, over the long run, will prove a forward thinking, wise investment for Alaska, western Canada and the two nations as a whole.

A few simple math calculations brought me to this conclusion. Alaskan natural gas must compete in the world marketplace, which means the yes or no decision to go ahead with pipeline construction will come down to fractions of a penny on the dollar.

Every possible efficiency will be needed in order to reduce construction costs, while at the same time meeting high environmental standards.

This is why the pipeline will demand use of 80-foot joints (or sections) because, when compared with 40-foot joints, half the welds will be needed over the length of the line. Fewer welds means lower cost and greater pipeline strength.

Trucks can carry a 60-foot joint, and can also handle an 80-foot joint with special equipment. However, when you consider the load-bearing ability of many bridges as well as older sections of highway, it seems unlikely our highway system can hold up to the kind of demands pipeline construction will bring.

The pipeline will be constructed of high tensile steel pipe that is 54 inches in diameter and 1¼ inch thick. Total weight of each of these segments of pipe is right around 65,000 pounds, or 32½ tons.

A railroad can move these 80-foot joints efficiently. One extended-length flatcar can carry around 100 tons, which allows three 80-foot joints of pipe stacked in a pyramid.

Momentum is starting to build. The Alaska Railroad is diligently straightening and double-tracking their line in and around Anchorage, and studies are underway to do the same through Wasilla and Fairbanks.

Senator Lisa Murkowski is working to find funds to extend the railroad from Eielson to Fort Greeley, in order to support the military, as well as the agriculture sector in Delta Junction. (With interest rates as low as they are, now would be a great time to begin to finance this project.) I have introduced legislation ([SB 31](#)) to keep this momentum growing. This bill is designed to authorize the Alaska Railroad to determine a corridor from Eielson to the Canadian Border, and then receive state land fee simple once a survey is complete.

The width of the corridor is still being worked out, but it must be wide enough to allow the railroad to construct sidings, depots and loading facilities. This bill appropriates no money, but it will permit the railroad to use any funds it can raise to survey and obtain other lands along the corridor route.

True to his promise to fight hard for new economic development, Governor Murkowski and his commissioners have been working closely with the Alaska Railroad and myself in order to make certain the best possible language is included in this bill.

A University of Alaska report figures it would take one million trips for trucks to haul 40' lengths of pipe in order to construct a 4,000-mile pipeline between the North Slope and Chicago.

Could the independent traveler – upon whom many Alaskan businesses depend – share the Alaska Highway with such a level of use? Could our roads stand up, considering the same report estimates each truck haul would equal the road use of 3,000 automobiles?

A rail connection from Alaska to the rest of North America – its been called the Last Transcontinental Railroad – has been spoken of since early territorial days.

It's interesting to note, I think, that the original transcontinental railway thrived at first on transshipping goods from Asia to Europe. By the time the Panama Canal was open, the railroad had long since grown into serving domestic markets.

Today, the Panama Canal is obsolete when it comes to serving the newest generation of freighters and tankers. Could a rail connection allow Alaskan ports to compete with the canal for billions of dollars in business?

Anchorage to Halifax by rail saves days off a Panama Canal transit. The canal's owners are looking at a multi-billion dollar upgrade. With those figures in mind, a rail connection makes even more sense for Alaska's future.

Now it's time to get this project underway.

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