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Railroads and "green"

Green is the latest buzzword. Everywhere you look, there are stories about green buildings, green systems and reducing the carbon footprint. But there's a lot more to all this than preserving polar bear habitat in the Arctic or protecting an endangered minnow in the latest construction project. As a long-time advocate of defending the environment myself, I find it somewhat comforting that some people on the environmental stage are just now discovering how green an industry railroading really is.

Yes, those emission-spewing, noisy, greasy hunks of hardware rolling across the country, committing dastardly deeds such as blocking motorists at grade crossings or sounding horns at inconvenient times are really the greenest of the green in transportation.

In terms of ton-miles moved, trucks and airplanes rank far, far behind railroads in fuel efficiency. Water traffic does pretty well moving cargo with good fuel efficiency, but the government has to spend great gobs of money to build and maintain their right-of-way, especially if you don't have a river handy to where you want to move goods. Canoeists like me and other recreational water users from power boaters to fishermen aren't pleased by all that damming and dredging for the benefit of the barges, leaving behind some not very desirable stretches of water.

In early November, it was my privilege to represent *Railway Age* and *RT&S* at the 2008 Railroad Environmental Conference. This was the tenth edition and like the previous nine, was held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Approximately 400 people showed up to take in the speakers, exhibits, poster presentations and more.

For two-and-a-half days, we listened to an incredible variety of well-informed speakers delivering well-thought-out presentations on a variety of environmental topics. Those of you who have attended these conferences know what I mean when I say my brain was stuffed and my butt was fatigued.

People talked about Energy, Emissions and Air Quality, Pollution Prevention, Sustainability, Noise and Vibration, Compliance, Environmental Management Systems, Storm Water and Waste Water, Environmental Response, Risk Management and Remediation, with several presentations under each of those headings.

Now I know that among my readers are lots of old curmudgeonly types whose blood pressure starts to rise at the mere thought of environmental remediation. Why should we worry about that? Because if we don't, we'll surely find ourselves in a serious situation. I'm talking about finding ourselves in court rooms facing some stern judges who are levying huge fines and/or imposing draconian remediation programs because we didn't comply with the law. You don't have to be a "green" mentally or politically to want to make very sure your company is complying with all the environmental laws.

Finally, kudos to the University of Illinois people (Full disclosure: I'm a UofI alumnus) who staged the event. It went so smoothly it was almost scary.



Tom Judge

Tom Judge, Editor