

Milwaukee Road Shouldn't Dump Its Electrics

(The name of the author of this piece is withheld for compelling personal reasons. — The Editor)

This summer, for the first time in 59 years, electric locomotives will no longer pull freight on the Milwaukee Road through Montana.

The Milwaukee Road says that its electric system is old, obsolete and uneconomical in comparison with modern diesel locomotives, and that further electric operation would require the expenditure of nearly \$50 million, which is far above what independent engineers estimate for upgrading the existing system.

"From a dollars and cents point of view, the railroad had no alternative . . ." to scrapping the electrics, the company's management says. "When first installed, the Milwaukee's electrified system was vastly superior to steam

operation, and even to diesel power of several years ago. It served us extremely well However, with highly efficient and versatile diesel locomotives available . . . the decision was inevitable."

Unfortunately for the railroad, shippers and the general public, the Milwaukee is dead wrong.

Recent Milwaukee Road Annual Reports indicate that the costs of maintaining the electric locomotives are about 40 per cent of the cost of maintaining equivalent horsepower diesel locomotives even though the electrics are, indeed, much older.

The Milwaukee Road cites exhaustive studies carried out over the years as the basis for the decision. Yet those studies have been kept strictly confidential, for no apparent reason, and evidence exists that at least two of those studies made conclusions directly contrary to the Milwaukee's decision.

The rest of the world has shown no such infatuation with diesel locomotive systems as American railroads have. The advanced industrial countries are, by and large, electrifying. Much of the present electrification in the world is of a direct current type patterned directly on the Milwaukee system. Indeed, the Soviet Union, which researches railway transport more thoroughly than anyone else in the world, has not only adopted the more recent high-voltage alternating current systems, but is extending and consolidating its DC systems.

Russia does not by any means consider DC systems obsolete.

The Milwaukee Road concedes that its electric system was far superior to steam. Interestingly, at least one professional engineer, Harry Farnsworth Brown, in an extensive and thorough study for British Railway officials in 1960, concluded that compared to steam " . . . the all-embracing economies claimed for diesel motive power on Class I railways of the United States, as a whole, do not appear in the statistical record.

"The diesel locomotive has not 'revolutionized' American railway economics. In road service, diesel motive power has added to the financial burden of the railways," Brown wrote.

It therefore follows that the electrics, superior to steam, must be superior to diesel motive power also.

A look at the Milwaukee record indicates why this is true.

A company study indicates that if the line from Harlowton, Mont., to Tacoma, Wash., were completely electrified (there is presently a 212-mile gap between Avery, Idaho and Othello, Wash.) 40 electric units would be required to move the tonnage. Going diesel would require 105 diesel units.

The diesel units would have to be replaced in 12-15 years, the lifetime of a diesel, the electrics would last 40-50 years, probably longer. Initial purchase prices of electrics are generally cheaper, per horsepower, than diesels.

The Milwaukee system is old, granted. But even at that, the 25-year-old "Little Joe" electrics, the newest electrics on the road, are faster, more reliable, and more powerful than any diesel yet made.

The system was designed to last forever, and it is only a matter of proper maintenance to achieve that end. The age of the system has been cited as the disadvantage that doomed the system (which sounds plausible since we have always been told that everything must wear out in this world), yet it is interesting to note that in 1956 one Milwaukee engineer wrote that the system, given standard maintenance, would last indefinitely; and it would seem at much less cost than buying whole new sets of diesel motive power every 12 years.

It has been made obvious these last two years that the use of petroleum ties us to an erratic, increasingly expensive source of fuel which will eventually run out. Even worse, a diesel manages to use only 28 per cent of the potential of diesel fuel. The electric system, by contrast, is over 72 per cent efficient in the use of what it receives from Montana Power.

It is clear that, once past the public relations nonsense, a close look at the performance and economics of the two systems indicates, without doubt, that the Milwaukee Road's electric operation is far superior to diesel operation, and in addition allows fuel to go to other uses such as keeping us warm and harvesting our crops.

Why then does the Milwaukee Road make a

clearly bad decision? The motives cannot be known for certain to outsiders, but a few conjectures can be made.

The Milwaukee Road has a lot of General Motors diesels and owes General Motors a lot of money. General Motors has missed a lot of sales because of the existence of the electric system. Recent charges by the mayor of Los Angeles about the scrapping of an electric railway in California indicate that GM is fully capable of applying pressure to increase profit.

A second possible reason involves the proposed merger of the Milwaukee and the Burlington Northern. In the event of a merger, the Milwaukee wants to abandon most of its parallel trackage in Montana.

The company sees no long-term advantage to substantial investment in a system that is on trackage to be abandoned.

That reasoning is logical, but painful for the public. In the event of a merger, the people not only lose the advantage of alternate rail systems, but are losing, in advance, one of the most efficient motive power systems ever designed.

That the Public Service Commission, public representatives, and other appropriate public agencies would allow this to happen is not in the public interest.

The public trust is being violated by the Milwaukee Road and the people elected to preserve that trust. The public should respond to that violation.

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