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CDOT: Trains on plains equals \$1.5B in benefits

By P.SOLOMON BANDA, The Associated Press

DENVER -

A Colorado Department of Transportation study says moving freight trains away from the Front Range and onto the eastern plains could have up to \$1.5 billion in benefits over 19 years.

The Colorado Rail Relocation Implementation Study released Tuesday examined moving Fort Worth, Texas-based BNSF Railway and Omaha, Neb.-based Union Pacific Railroad trains to new or upgraded tracks east of Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo. The study examined two routes roughly between Brush and Wiggins to the north and Las Animas to the south.

Train traffic through the populous Front Range would drop from 31 trains daily to 13. Most of the rerouted trains would be the up to two-mile long trains carrying coal from Wyoming's Powder River Basin to power plants in Texas.

CDOT will use the \$1.7 million, federally funded study to examine whether taxpayers should help pay for the plan.

It now goes to an advisory committee, CDOT spokesman Bob Wilson said.

The largest benefits, according to the study, would come from a new \$1.18 billion, 180-mile railroad track between Brush and Las Animas. A plan to upgrade existing Union Pacific track roughly from Strasburg to Aroya and build new track for a 220-mile route between roughly Wiggins and Las Animas would result in \$971 million in benefits and cost \$797 million.

Benefits from moving freight trains away from the Front Range include reduced fuel and crew costs to the railroad companies, economic growth to eastern plains cities, and reduced wait times at railroad crossings. The study estimated the benefits from 2012 to 2031.

"This is the look at the long term," Wilson said, adding: "The plan wouldn't happen overnight."

Union Pacific spokesman Mark Davis said the study that examined building a new track did not take into account all of UP's costs, thus making a new track appear more attractive than upgrading existing Union Pacific tracks.

"We hope the state will address our concerns," Davis said.

A BNSF spokesman did not immediately return a phone call.

The study makes no recommendations, and additional studies will examine the environmental impact and other costs, including appraisals for acquiring the right of way.

Wilson said the study did not examine the benefits from passenger rail service along the Front Range.

A separate feasibility study by the Rocky Mountain Rail Authority on high-speed passenger rail service along the Front Range and into the mountains is expected to be completed in July. Harry Dale, chairman of that intergovernmental organization, said they're examining building dedicated passenger rail lines along the rights of way of freight railroads or Interstate 25 and Interstate 70.

Wilson said the freight train and passenger train studies may be combined later this year.