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NEW KID ON THE BLOCK THE WASHINGTON & IDAHO RAILWAY IN THE PALOUSE

In October, 2006,

the newly-formed Washington & Idaho Railway took over operation of the WI&M and the former Northern Pacific P&L line between Moscow, ID and Marshall, WA. Earlier that year, the WATCO-owned Palouse River & Coulee City had stopped running trains entirely on either route, and the State of Washington, which owned the tracks, began looking for another railroad to take over. Since the W&I has come into the picture, trains are running again, and traffic levels are on the rise. Only a few months ago, the W&I instituted a unique program where

BNSF provides empty 110-car unit grain trains, complete with 4-unit BNSF locomotive sets, for the W&I to run down to elevators at Spangle and Oakesdale for loading.

Earlier this month, I had a few minutes to speak with Stan Patterson, president of the W&I, to learn more about his railroad and its prospects for the future.

TH: Tell me how the W&I got started?

SP: We had the BG&CM (Bountiful Grain & Craig Mountain Railroad), which is basically the eastern half of the Camas Prairie, and then we were asked if we were interested in operating [the Palouse River & Coulee City rail lines] as an intermediary between WATCO and the State of Washington. We were neutral to the State, and at the same time, we were one of the few companies that had neutral business dealings with WATCO.



A six-car Washington & Idaho Ry. freight rolls west along the Palouse River Valley as it nears Wellesley, Idaho in March, 2008.
T. Hillebrant photo

TH: So you stepped in as the operator of the State owned tracks?

SP: Correct. The State owns the P&L and they own the WI&M from Palouse to about milepost 3.5. WATCO still owns the Idaho miles, but we were asked by Washington to step in, and WATCO gave us the operating rights. It was a six-month agreement we had between WATCO and the State. We would operate it until they could put [a long-term operating contract] up for bid, so that a new operator could be found. That way, the P&L wouldn't go through another harvest without any train traffic. It had been shut down for nearly a year [before we took over]. The whole P&L had only done 70 cars the year prior to us taking over.

TH: How did you manage the heavy snowfall this winter?

The non-profit WI&M Ry. History Preservation Group, Inc has been organized for railroad historians, enthusiasts, and modelers interested in gathering and sharing information on the Washington, Idaho & Montana Railway, from its origins in 1905 through it's operations of today.