

Opinion: BNSF strikes back on KC air quality letter

(The following by Brad Cooper appeared on the Kansas City Star website on September 3, 2009.)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Yesterday, we posted a new letter from regional air quality experts suggesting that BNSF's proposed rail yard near Gardner would aggravate our already serious air pollution problems.

Late in the day, we got a response from BNSF spokesman Steve Forsberg, explaining the railroad's position.

His e-mail noted that an air quality technical study as well as a hotly contested federal environmental evaluation show that ozone-threatening emissions are projected to decrease substantially during the first two decades of operation.

"While the project does not represent a significant portion of metro-wide emissions of these pollutants, decreases in project-related emissions due to U.S. EPA rules would contribute to reductions in emissions of these ozone-causing pollutants in the Kansas City metropolitan area. "

The bottom line: "The proposed project would not result in significant changes to ozone-causing emissions in the greater Kansas City metropolitan area."

Of course, air quality experts at the Mid-America Regional Council are worried that the rail yard will have the opposite effect.

They directly challenged the preliminary federal environmental report (the one referenced by BNSF) that suggested that the most serious problem emanating from the rail yard was dust kicked up from vehicles entering and leaving the facility.

MARC won some praise this week from environmentalists who said the agency was unusually candid in its assessment of an economic development project that is treasured by economic development leaders in suburban Johnson County and Kansas.

"They just tend to be very general in their assessments and they tend to not want to interfere with any economic development. This is a bit stronger than what I've seen in the past," said Craig Volland, chairman of Kansas Sierra Club's air quality committee.

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