

Original URL: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wauk/sep04/261518.asp>

Trains blocking hunters' paths

Concerns raised over access to 2 state wildlife areas

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Posted: Sept. 24, 2004

Access to state wildlife areas in Waukesha, Washington and Dodge counties has been restricted this year by trains parked on Canadian National Railway sidetracks for as long as 90 minutes, hunters have told state and railway officials.

State wildlife managers and upset hunters also said recently that they have encountered an uncooperative attitude at Canadian National. And they are worried about hunters and hikers who might have to leave wildlife areas quickly for medical or safety reasons but cannot because trains are blocking exit roads.

The areas of concern are Vernon Marsh Wildlife Area, nearly 4,000 acres in southern Waukesha County, and Theresa Marsh Wildlife Area, about 6,000 acres covering northern Washington and southern Dodge counties.

The heavily used Canadian National north/south line passes along the borders of both wildlife areas.

"The general consensus is that it's getting worse," Jim Jackley, Vernon Marsh wildlife biologist, said of the trains. "Aside from being an inconvenience, there's certainly a safety concern if someone is hurt or a wildfire occurs."

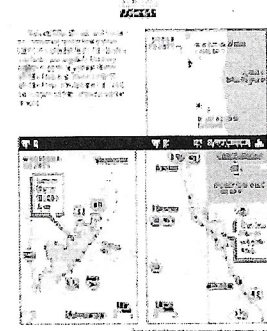
Canadian National spokesman Kevin Soucie said he intends to investigate the complaints, which will include meeting with hunters at Vernon Marsh.

The problem at both wildlife areas is that trains are being parked for lengthy periods on sidetracks that run parallel to the main north/south line. Trains wait at those "sidings" while oncoming trains pass through.

Youth hunt incidents

The sidetracks cross Benson Ave. in the Town of Vernon in Waukesha County and two unnamed dirt roads used as footpaths into Theresa Marsh.

Outdoors



Access

Line: Trains blocking hunters' paths

Soucie said he was unaware of an incident last weekend at Vernon Marsh that spoiled the opening of the state-sponsored weekend duck hunt for youths.

About 10 carloads of hunters waited nearly 90 minutes early last Saturday for a parked train to move off Benson Ave., the only eastern entrance to Vernon Marsh.

"Here was a bunch of disappointed kids," said Sydney Herman of Waukesha, a frequent hunter at Vernon. "It happens once a year for the kids to encourage them to hunt. And the railroad had to screw it up for them."

Herman complained last week about the increasing frequency of parked trains at Vernon. He said a train last year blocked him inside the marsh for an hour.

Jackley said he was stuck in the marsh last year for about 10 minutes when he decided to call the train dispatcher to find out when the train would move.

"I was assured the train would move in a few minutes, and it didn't happen," he said. About 30 minutes later, he was able to leave the marsh.

Herman had asked Canadian National to keep Benson Ave. open for the weekend youth hunt, to which he took his granddaughter, Alissa Schueller, 13.

The first half-hour of daylight is the most productive time to hunt ducks. "They robbed us of that," Herman said.

Soucie said he would arrange a meeting with hunters through Herman.

"I'd like to go down and take a look at the marsh with him," Soucie said, "but that doesn't mean anything will change on the railroad's part."

90-minute wait

Jim Miner of Waukesha said he, too, experienced disappointment with the railroad.

He and his son, Alex, 12, drove onto Benson Ave. about 5 a.m. Saturday, expecting to have plenty of time to prepare for the hunt. Legal shooting was set to begin at 6:07 a.m.

A parked train brought father and son to a stop, not far from Herman and his granddaughter. None of them wanted to risk crawling underneath the train or walking around it to get to the hunting grounds. Instead, they waited for the train to move, and it did about 6:30 a.m., Miner said.

"This was supposed to be his first hunt after just completing his hunter's safety course," Miner said of his son. "He was really disappointed."

Tom Isaac, wildlife biologist for Theresa Marsh, said the difficulties with trains there were not as serious as those at Vernon Marsh.

"It's usually for a short period of time and doesn't happen all of the time," Isaac said.

He said his relationship with the railroad was good, and that trains had moved at his request.

Miner said he wonders why the railroad doesn't uncouple parked trains to keep Benson Ave. open.

Soucie said that is done in emergency situations, but that it usually leads to bigger delays of 20 or 40 minutes to reconnect the train cars.

From the Sept. 25, 2004, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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