



COLUMBIA BASIN RAILROAD

ROBERT W. SCOTT/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

FROM HIS OFFICE IN YAKIMA, WASH., Columbia Basin Railroad's Tim Kelly reflects on his 43 years of railroading. As the chief operating officer for the Columbia Basin Railroad (CBRW), he is in charge of one of the most important railroads of Central Washington, one that serves the large agricultural industry of the region. His story of railroading includes starting out on the Soo Line and working for the Wisconsin Central, Alabama & Gulf Coast, and the Dallas, Garland & North Eastern before moving to the Columbia Basin in 2008.

"The Columbia Basin Railroad is a vital link to the agricultural industry of the region," Kelly says. "The railroad has a unique ability to talk one-on-one with the shippers on a regular basis." It's clear the railroad is about customer service and frequent collaboration with its shippers. As 2017 came to a close, Kelly retired from the railroad industry, leaving behind quite a legacy that others will be sure to follow in his footsteps.

The history of the CBRW started with the sale of the Washington Central back to Burlington Northern Santa Fe in 1996 (BNSF had sold it in 1986), which

encompassed part of the Stampede Pass line east of Easton, Wash. After the sale, brothers Brig and Eric Temple entered into a lease with BNSF for the Columbia Basin in 1996 and purchased outright the majority of the line in 2007. BNSF still owns the rail line from Warden to Othello, which is under long-term lease to CBRW.

The Columbia Basin Railroad runs from Connell, Wash., north to Warden and farther onto Moses Lake, with two additional secondary lines to Othello and Schrag. Originally built in 1910 by the Connell Northern Railroad, the line was

OPPOSITE: Columbia Basin crews ready the power for the day's operations on September 18, 2013, including this former Missabe SD9. On this day, the unit will be part of the power for the interchange train, known as the Warden Day Job, and will run from Warden to Connell and return. ABOVE: The Wheeler Job works extra on the Schrag line at times, especially during the harvest season to retrieve cars filled with wheat. The wheat is carried in yellow State of Washington "Grain Train" cars that are assigned to captive service between Schrag and ports in Oregon and Washington. The relatively light rail on this line restricts power to four-axle units. Columbia Basin 2294, a former Santa Fe GP9u, leads the train on this day.



ABOVE: Two geeps lead the Wheeler Job south crossing Interstate 90 on its way back from switching Wheeler and Moses Lake on September 18, 2013. The train will work the Schrag line and return to Warden. Later that evening this would be the power on the Othello Job, working overnight.

RIGHT: The CBRW Wheeler Job has finished its work and is ready to depart south past grain silos at Wheeler. The mainline ends another mile to the north, and trains use a trailing-point spur to enter the industrial areas of Moses Lake.

OPPOSITE: The engines are in dynamic brake mode as the train eases down a 1 percent grade with 74 cars on its drawbar and ducks under State Highway 26 at Koren.



Milwaukee Road also built through the region, crossing the Connell Northern at Warden and crisscrossing the NP into Moses Lake on a secondary track that went north from Warden.

The majority of the railroad is built along the lay of the land, following coulees and draws to reach the top of the hills, and then across rolling land with some fills and cuts as needed to maintain a maximum 1 percent gradient. The

Today's Columbia Basin Railroad operates on 86 miles of track — 73 of those owned by the CBRW, the remaining 13

miles on lease from BNSF. It utilizes former NP and MILW routes to provide service to the area with Warden being the railroad's base of operations. Servicing Grant and Adams Counties, this region is the nation's leading producer of potatoes. At nearly 10,000 car loadings per year, the main source of traffic



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is from the agricultural industry. In 2008, BNSF named the Columbia Basin its Shortline of the Year. In 2014, it was recognized as the busiest shortline in Washington State.

According to Kelly, the traffic base has changed over the past few years. "The nature of that traffic has changed. Reductions of some carloadings were due to frozen french fries being trucked for export to Seattle," Kelly reports. "The railroad also hauled outbound sugar beets to California until 1999. We have seen some erosion on segments of some business, but fertilizer movement has strengthened. There have been three significant fertilizer distribution plants added over the past five years."

The largest customer on the railroad is Pacific Coast Canola, which receives blocks of cars of canola seed for the new processing plant at Warden. The source of the canola is North Dakota, Minnesota, and the Canadian prairies. The processing plant is the only one of its kind west of the Mississippi, and was built due to the reasonable electrical rates and building provisions in Grant County. Production first started in 2012, with BNSF providing unit trains on occasion. The second source of carloadings is perishable traffic, with multiple industries shipping frozen french fries via reefers. Fertilizer traffic makes up the third source, with many locations transloading to truck from railcar for the

agricultural business. Boxcars of paper are brought in for the manufacturing of cardboard boxes in Moses Lake and make up the fourth busiest commodity on the railroad. Finally boxcar traffic rounds out the fifth source of traffic, with freight being transloaded in Moses Lake for transport via truck to Central and Eastern Washington due to the proximity of Interstate 90.

The Railroad Route

The south side of the Columbia Basin Railroad is anchored at Connell, Wash., meeting point with the BNSF Lakeside Subdivision and the interchange point between the two railroads. A small yard provides a place to interchange trains if both meet at the same time. There are no online industries served at Connell by the CBRW. From Connell, the tracks start climbing on a steady 1 percent compensated grade up the west side of the Providence Coulee before taking a side valley and continuing to climb to Paradise Flats, reaching the summit six miles later at Frischknecht. Although home to an elevator and other agricultural businesses, Frischknecht does not see regular freight business.

From Frischknecht the tracks climb on a 1 percent grade again for four miles to Shano, which is home to a small amount of fertilizer traffic each year. Following an up-and-down roller coaster profile of 0.7 to 1 percent grades,

above: The Wheeler Job is returning from Bassett Junction with the cut of grain cars on the head end, passing a freshly harvested field of potatoes on September 18, 2013.

opposite top: The BNSF interchange train accelerates through the S-curves out of Warden on May 17, 2016. The train will continue to climb another two miles before reaching the roller coaster profile that leads to Connell.

opposite bottom: Two ex-Santa Fe geeps lead the interchange train to Connell through the town of Bruce on June 23, 2006.

six miles farther is the siding at Bruce. Primary commodities shipped at Bruce include fertilizer, propane, and cattle feed. Nine miles farther is the main headquarters at Warden, which is home to the CBRW engine terminal as well as a small yard. This is also the location where the CBRW line is crossed by the former MILW mainline. The CBRW uses the MILW tracks to reach a few industries in Warden and to access Othello. Industries in Warden include the Pacific Coast Canola processing plant, potato processing, vegetables and onions, and fertilizer traffic.

Pacific Coast Canola receives inbound canola seed and ships out canola oil and canola meal. The mainline continues five miles north down a 0.6 percent



COLUMBIA BASIN RAILROAD ROSTER

UNIT	MODEL	BUILT	NOTES
CBRW 166	SD9	9/59	ex-DMIR 166
CBRW 171	SD9	4/59	ex-DMIR 171
CBRW 12	SD9	4/59	ex-CS 832
CBRW 651	SD19-1	3/57	ex-EJE 601
CBRW 652	SD19-1	4/56	ex-SP 5483
CBRW 608	SD9	2/57	ex-DMIR 121
CBRW 610	SD9	3/57	ex-EJE 602
CBRW 302	GP9	2/57	ex-NP 316
CBRW 1626	GP9	8/57	ex-NP 328
CBRW 2274	GP9u	5/56	ex-ATSF 716
CBRW 2282	GP9u	5/56	ex-ATSF 729
CBRW 2294	GP9u	5/56	ex-ATSF 719
CBRW 2087	GP38	12/67	ex-CO 3887
CBRW 2184	GP38	4/67	ex-SBD 6275

—Compiled by Robert W. Scott

grade to Bassett Junction where the secondary line to Shrag leaves the main at the bottom of the Lind Coulee. From there the track starts the climb toward the plateau at Moses Lake. Access to Moses Lake is via three routes, including the former NP and MILW routings. The main west route is on the former MILW and passes by the sidings at Sieler, where fertilizer and cattle feed are delivered, and the siding at McDonald where cars of beans are shipped. At Moses Lake, industries include fertilizer, propane, and seed plus a business that produces starch from potato waste.

The second route into Moses Lake accesses the former sugar beet loading site. The eastern route crosses Interstate 90 and is the main route to Wheeler and access to the industrial section of Moses Lake. At Wheeler, a large amount of traffic includes International Paper, which receives boxcars of paper for cardboard production, and transloading of fertilizer at the old sugar beet site. Cement mix is also shipped to an industry, as is cattle feed, french fry oil, lube oil, and boxcar traffic for truck transload at Zip Trucking. Akzo Nobel receives salt and manufactures bleaching chemicals for outbound shipment to the paper industry. Wheeler is also home to an NP steam-era water tank that is still standing.

The secondary line from Warden to Othello is on the former MILW mainline. Commodities in Othello include frozen french fries, which total a couple of thousand carloadings per year. Also at Othello are bean processing, cattle feed, and a mixture of agricultural materials. Beyond Othello, the old MILW line continues to Royal City. Operated by Frontier Rail, the line to Royal City is being used for car storage but has seen a few carloads over the past year. From



ABOVE: The Wheeler Job is entering yard limits at Warden after crossing the East Low Channel irrigation canal that passes through town. Warden was once the crossroad point between the former NP and MILW lines. The CBRW uses the former MILW mainline to reach Othello for its night job.

OPPOSITE: Running along the side of the Weber Coulee, the Wheeler Job has a large cut of "Grain Train" hoppers in tow bound for the Harvest States export elevator at Kalama, Wash. The train is on the Schrag line which, at one point, was a portion of a planned NP bypass west out of Ritzville.

Bassett Junction east, the former NP line extends a few miles to the wheat elevator at Schrag that ships outbound wheat loads. The wheat loads are hauled in yellow State of Washington Grain Train hoppers and are in captive service between Schrag and export elevators at Portland, Ore., and Kalama, Wash. The Schrag line was part of an initial plan for the NP to build a cutoff west from Ritzville in the early 1900s, but was only graded east of Schrag.

Rail on the mainline is predominately 100-pound between Connell and Wheeler, with a combination of 100, 112 and 132-pound rail on the former MILW line. The Schrag line has the lightest rail at 85 pounds, which limits power to four-axle geeps. The railroad is continually upgrading the line, with the goal of adding 9,900 new ties between Warden and Othello and resurfacing the line between Warden and Wheeler in 2018. "The goal of the railroad is to install 600 ties to the mile on the mainline every five years," says Kelly. The maximum speed on the railroad is 25 m.p.h. Of the total mileage, 40 miles is considered the mainline from Connell to Wheeler, with the remaining 36 miles being secondary mains, sidings, and yard tracks.

Change to the railroad is also coming with the help of grant dollars from the federal government and the State of Washington. "The railroad is working with BNSF on the design phase of a new interchange yard at Connell, west

from the current interchange spot. The City of Connell is working on additional grant dollars to assist with the project. The goal is to reduce the amount of time trains are blocking crossings in Connell," Kelly says. Placing the new yard just to the west of town allows for quick passage of trains through town without tying up grade crossings for any longer than necessary.

The area around Moses Lake is set to receive substantial grant support for projects, including removing the former MILW track in downtown Moses Lake and providing a connector to downtown from the Wheeler side of the railroad off the former NP line. It will also allow for additional rail development around the Grant County Airport. The current mainline has been removed just north of Wheeler.

Operations

Operations on the Columbia Basin are based out of Warden. The interchange train to BNSF is simply referred to as the Warden Day Job that is on duty at 8:00 a.m. on weekdays except Wednesday, with the crew operating as needed. An extra job is called to the interchange on Sundays. The Wheeler Job goes on duty at Warden at 9:00 a.m. with service Monday through Thursday. This job works extra to Schrag as needed. The Othello Job is on duty at 8:00 p.m. on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday.



Today, the railroad is home to classic first- and second-generation EMD power, with SD9s and GP9s making up the majority of the roster. The Columbia Basin is also one of the last holdouts for SD9s in shortline service. The railroad now rosters a total of seven SD9s, with their primary use being for the interchange train to BNSF. Kelly explains these diesels are the perfect solution to the grades on the line. "We chose the SD9s due to the additional tractive effort they provide to us. Operating at 25 m.p.h., we do not necessarily require the additional speed — it's the pulling power of the engines and how they operate on the grades with our interchange train."

The railroad also has an unusual operating scheme at times on their

interchange trains. "We try to meet the BNSF train at Connell at the same time so we can directly exchange trains. If we arrive in Connell and the train has been yarded, it requires us to piece the train together. When that is needed, we will employ a pusher engine if we have a second certified engineer on duty," says Kelly. "We have an inability to run around long trains at Connell, and the yard tracks will only hold 25 cars each."

Rounding out the motive power on the railroad are five GP9s and two GP38s. The two GP38s are at times in use on the Central Washington Railroad in the Yakima Valley, with a lone GP9 on the Yakima Job. The Central Washington Railroad is under the same ownership as the CBRW and shares motive power as

needed.

Warden is about three hours east of the Seattle area, and about an hour and a half west of Spokane. Interstate 90 provides the quickest access to the Moses Lake area, with Warden being a few miles south off State Highway 17. There is fairly good access to the railroad from county and farm roads in the area, which are predominately set on one-mile grids. Some of those roads are dirt or gravel and can become slick for travel during inclement weather. This region can be extremely hot in the summer and cold and snowy during winter months.

Central Washington may host several shortline railroads, but the Columbia Basin combines the granger style of railroading on some historic railroad lines

with a set of distinctive motive power not regularly seen these days. Those who travel to view this operation will not be disappointed in seeing how a shortline helps shape a region. As a retiree now, Tim Kelly can look back at his railroading career that started and ended on a granger style of railroad — first, the Soo Line and last, the Columbia Basin. In future years, the CBRW will continue to provide an important connection to the region and its agricultural products. ■