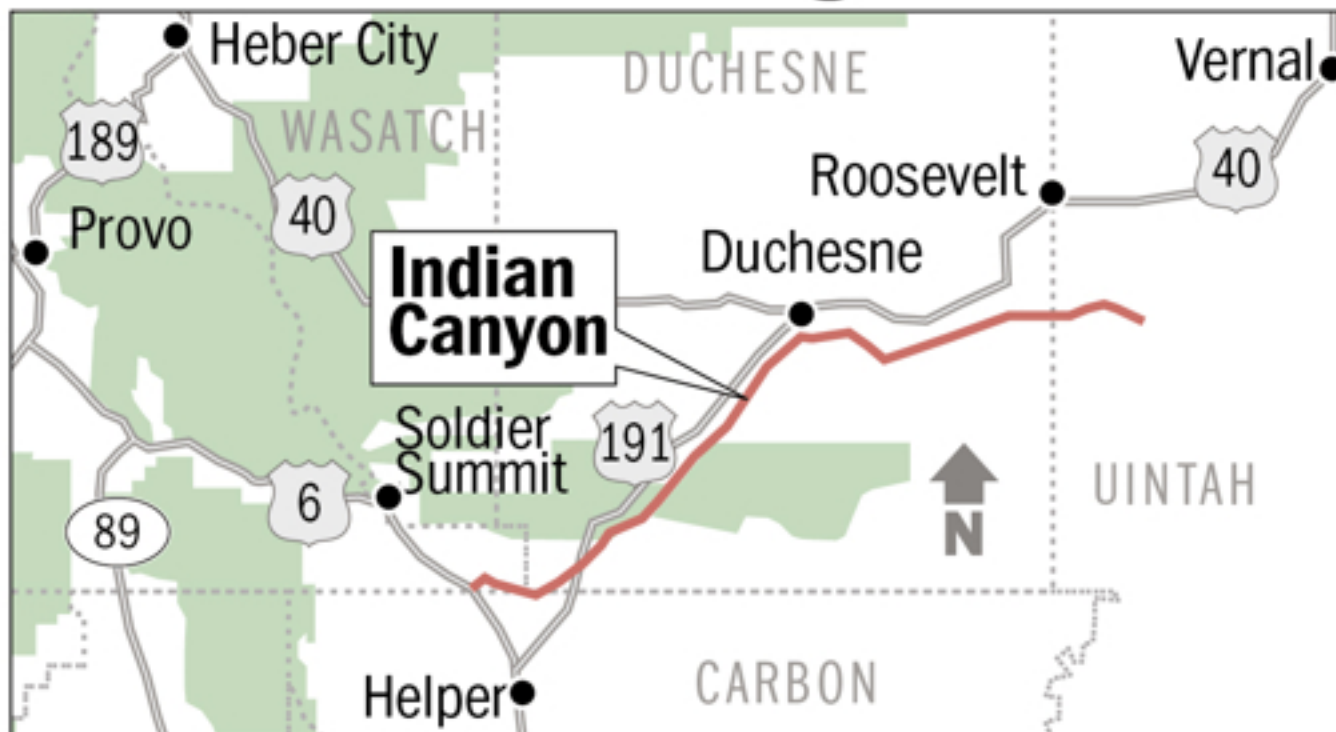


A new freight train route for Utah? Uinta Basin hopes so

SALT LAKE CITY — An 80-mile railway linking the Uinta Basin to the national railroad network would open up the geologically hemmed in region to expanded markets for oil, coal, agricultural products and other goods such as soda ash.

Information on the Uinta Basin railway project will be available during a scoping meeting from 10 a.m. to noon Friday at the Radisson Hotel, 215 W. South Temple.

Proposed Uinta Basin railway



SOURCE: Seven County Infrastructure Coalition

Deseret News

The Seven County Infrastructure Coalition is pitching the proposal to the Surface Transportation Board, a federal bipartisan adjudication board that

decides some regulatory issues related to commerce and transportation.

A public comment [period](#) on the project ends Aug. 5.

The coalition identified 29 potential routes for the railway, whittled those options down to eight, and now have three alternatives that will be reviewed.

The preferred route is 80 miles long and runs along U.S. 191 in Indian Canyon for 21 miles, tunnels through the West Tavaputs Plateau and links up with the Union Pacific line at Soldier Summit.

Mike McKee, the coalition's executive director, said the railway would open up significant markets for basin goods and provide a lifeline for more jobs in the rural area.

"We are one of the most underserved areas in the country with the lack of rail, the lack of an interstate," he said. "We are tremendously disadvantaged compared to other areas."

The project, if it comes to fruition, will be funded and constructed by Drexel Hamilton Infrastructure Partners, which is inking contracts with industry and manufacturers to move goods.

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Those contracts by users would pay for construction of the rail, according to coalition spokeswoman Tammy Champo, who said the total project cost is dependent on which route is chosen.

If Indian Canyon is selected, the cost would be between \$1.2 billion and \$1.4 billion. Rio Grande Pacific Corp. would be the railway operator.

While proponents see the railway as a way to connect the Uinta Basin commerce to the rest of the nation, critics are blasting it as a "train wreck" for the environment, air quality and as a financial investment.

Ryan Beam, public lands campaigner with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the railway would harm environmental health and public health.

"The railway would more than quadruple oil production, from 80,000 barrels per day to 380,000 barrels per day in an area already choking on some of the worst air in the country thanks to oil and gas development."

Rikki Hrenko-Browning, president of the Utah Petroleum Association, said the basin certainly has the ability to ramp up production with its untapped reserves, but a new railway doesn't come with any set production target.

"I think overall it is a positive and it takes us in the right direction, but it is not going to fundamentally change production in the basin overnight," she said. "The basin will still have to compete with every other basin in the country in terms of cost."

The railway would also transport other products, such as hay, coal and minerals, but Beam said the primary driver is increased oil production and getting more barrels of the fossil fuel on the market. Such an investment, he added, is ill-advised given the increasing trend toward community investment in clean, renewable energy resources.

Champo, however, said it will provide a needed economic boost to the region, providing jobs and transportation infrastructure long overdue.

"It provides a diverse economic opportunity for the industries [8 comments on this story](#) that are already operating in the Uinta Basin and the potential for others coming into the basin," she said. "There's been a long-standing need for transportation infrastructure because of the geology in the Uinta Basin. It is landlocked, trucking is expensive and limits our potential. It will improve the quality of life for people who are committed to living in the Uinta Basin."

The Center for Biological Diversity and other groups are submitting comments detailing objections to the project.

If approved by federal officials, construction could begin as early as 2022.