Background information

29. August 2019

NRLA at the service of the environment

The opening of the Ceneri base tunnel in 2020 will mark the completion of the New Rail Link through the Alps (NRLA), a major cornerstone of Swiss transport policy. The level railway through the Alps allows more freight to be shifted from road to rail, saving around 800,000 truck journeys. Attractive rail connections are created for travellers and commuters who want to avoid exhaust fumes, particulate matter and noise.

In 1992 the Swiss voted in favour of the NRLA. This vast construction project ensures shorter, faster and thus more efficient connections between north and south, thereby increasing the competitiveness of rail for freight and passenger transport. From December 2020, when the Ceneri base tunnel opens and the four-metre corridor on the Gotthard axis is complete, the railway operators and freight companies will have a continuous level railway along this route. The NRLA also contributes to the protection of the Alps. By shifting more heavy goods away from the roads onto rail, the impact on the environment is lessened. The Federal Council already pointed out in its dispatch on the 1990 NRLA construction project that it would form an ‘important element in the Federal Council’s air pollution control policy’.

Environmental impact: progress, but targets not yet reached

Environmental monitoring in the government’s 2017 report on the shift from road to rail shows that great progress has already been made in reducing pollution along the transit axes by transferring heavy goods vehicles to the railways. There has also been a steady reduction in noise emission from rail transport in recent years. From 2020, noisy freight wagons will be completely banned in Switzerland, thereby reducing noise pollution even further.

In road traffic through the Alps, heavy goods vehicles and delivery vans each account for a quarter of nitrogen oxide emissions. The remaining fifty per cent is generated by cars.

Nitrogen oxide emissions have decreased significantly since measurements were first taken (2003), as has fine particulate air pollution. However, emission limits for nitrogen dioxide are still exceeded in southern Switzerland and the Basel area. The heavy goods vehicle charge (HGVC) introduced as part of the policy to shift road freight to rail promotes the use of clean vehicles and discourages trucks from making journeys half-empty. As trucks are banned from driving at night in Switzerland, noise pollution caused by road freight traffic is only an issue from 5am onwards.

Switzerland’s transport policy has led to a reduction in the number of truck journeys from around 1.4 million in 2001 to 941,000 in 2018. Without the measures introduced to shift freight traffic to rail, around 1.8 million trucks would now cross the Alps each year. The railways have increased their market share to 70.5 percent of the goods transported (2018). Clearly, the measures are having an effect. However,
the target set in law of 650,000 truck journeys per year has not yet been reached. Air pollution and noise levels must also be reduced further.

**New impetus for road-to-rail policy**

In its next policy report, the Federal Council will outline further measures to shift more freight from road to rail. There are plans to reduce track access charges and to introduce a special discount for long freight trains, making transport by rail cheaper and creating greater capacity. DETEC is also examining the possibility of continuing to provide operating subsidies for combined transport operators beyond 2023, increasing the HGVC for dirty lorries and making more checks on heavy goods vehicles. The next road-to-rail policy report is planned for the end of 2019.

When the NRLA is completed in 2020, there will be a continuous level railway through the Alps. This means faster and more frequent connections – and further impetus to the road-to-rail policy.

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**Environmental considerations in the construction of the NRLA**

Environmental considerations including the impact of construction activities on humans, animals, air and water were a major factor during the building of the NRLA. Measures were implemented to reduce energy consumption and pollutant and noise emissions. A large part of the material excavated from the base tunnels was processed into concrete aggregates and used to line the tunnels. The rest of the material was used for landscaping or constructing embankments. One tenth of the excavation material from the Gotthard base tunnel was used to restore wetlands on Lake Lucerne.

The construction of the Ceneri base tunnel produced a total of around 8.7 million tonnes of excavated material, part of which could be reused. The rest was transported by conveyor belts from the tunnel construction sites to the material deposit at the foot of Monte Ferrino. The deposit is being landscaped to blend into the surroundings and become part of a wildlife corridor, which continues via the newly built Dosso di Taverne wildlife crossing to the other side of the valley.

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