Savannah Industrial Logistics, LLC and Savannah Industrial Transportation, LLC After-the-Fact Construction and Operation of Rail Line

Effingham County, Georgia

Docket Nos. FD 36723 and FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1)

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Information Contact:

Karen Stevens, Environmental Protection Specialist

Surface Transportation Board
Office of Environmental Analysis
395 E. Street, SW
Washington, DC 20423

202.245.0304

Summary

S.1 Introduction

On September 28, 2023, Savannah Industrial Logistics, LLC (SIL) filed a petition in Docket No. FD 36723, seeking authorization from the Surface Transportation Board (the Board) for after-the-fact authority to construct an 11,404 foot rail line in Effingham County, Georgia (the Line), and Savannah Industrial Transportation, LLC (SIT), an affiliate of SIL, filed for after-the-fact authority to lease and operate the same Line in Docket No. 36723 (Sub-No. 1). SIL and SIT are both holdings of OmniTRAX Holding Combined, Inc. (OmniTRAX). The Line is located in an industrial park, the Savannah Gateway Industrial Hub (SGIH), near the City of Rincon. The Line provides SGIH with dual access to two large Class I railroads: Norfolk Southern Railway (NSR) and CSX Transportation, Inc. (CSXT). The Line has no mileposts and extends from a connection with NSR to the west, near NSR milepost 16.6, to a connection with CSXT to the east, near CSXT milepost S484.0. SGIH is located 12 miles from the Port of Savannah, Georgia, and five miles northwest of Interstate 95 (I-95), the main north-south interstate on the East Coast.

Construction and operation of new common carrier rail lines require prior authorization by the Board, either through an application under 49 U.S.C. § 10901 or an exemption from the formal application requirements of § 10901 under § 10502. However, the Line already exists because it was constructed and leased without the requisite Board authority. OmniTRAX and SIL had previously constructed the Line as a part of a larger project to construct the SGIH, without seeking Board authorization or undergoing environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321-4370m-11, and historic review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), 54 U.S.C. § 306108, by the Board.

Before deciding whether to authorize the after-the-fact construction and lease and operation of the Line, the Board must consider the impacts of that decision on the environment. The after-the-fact environmental and historic review of the construction and operation of the Line is provided in this Draft Environmental Assessment (Draft EA).

S.2 Purpose and Need

The after-the-fact construction, lease, and operation of the Line has not been proposed or sponsored by the federal government. Notably, the Line was constructed and leased without the required Board authority.[1] Here, the proposed federal action is the Board's decision to approve with appropriate conditions, or deny, SIL's request for after-the fact authority to construct approximately 11,404 feet of rail line, and SIT's request for after-the-fact authority to lease and operate the same line. If the Board grants SIL and SIT's petitions, SIT would be able to operate the approximately 11,404 feet of previously constructed rail line as a common carrier. As a

[1] See Savannah Industrial Transportation, LLC – Operation Exemption – In Effingham County, Ga., FD 36489 (STB served August 1, 2023).

common carrier, SIT would be required to provide rail service to any shipper upon reasonable request. 49 U.S.C. § 11101(a).

The purpose and need for the Line is informed by the goals of SIL and SIT in conjunction with the Board's enabling statute—sections 10502 and 10901 of the Interstate Commerce Act, as amended by the ICC Termination Act, Pub. L. No. 104-188, 109 State. 803 (1996). According to SIL and SIT, the purpose of the Proposed Action is to ensure the development and continuation of a sound rail transportation system and to provide alternative transportation options for all current and future tenants at the SGIH, which would benefit from nearby connections to two large Class I rail carriers (NSR and CSXT) as well as I-95 and the nearby Port of Savannah. SIL and SIT state that the Proposed Action would maintain and enhance competition among rail carriers and with other transportation modes.

S.3 Draft EA and Final EA Process

The Board's Office of Environmental Analysis (OEA) is responsible for conducting the environmental and historic review process, independently analyzing environmental data, and making environmental recommendations to the Board. OEA is issuing this Draft EA for public review and comment for 30 days. Comments are due by **May 12, 2025**. OEA will consider all timely comments received on this Draft EA and, in the Final EA, will respond to substantive comments and provide OEA's final recommended environmental mitigation. In making its final decision on whether to authorize the Line, the Board will consider the entire record, including the Draft EA and Final EA, all comments received, OEA's recommendations, and the transportation merits of the proposal.

S.4 Alternatives

NEPA directs federal agencies to consider "a reasonable range of alternatives to the proposed agency action, including an analysis of any negative environmental impacts of not implementing the proposed agency action in case of a no action alternative, that are technically and economically feasible, and meet the purpose and need of the proposal." 42 U.S.C.§ 4332(C)(iii)

OEA has carried forward the Proposed Action and the No-Action Alternative for detailed analysis. Because the Line had already been constructed, OEA concluded that there are no other technically and economically feasible alternatives to analyze in this Draft EA.

S.5 Summary of Impacts

S.5.1 No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action alternative, the Board would not authorize the after-the-fact rail construction, nor would the Board authorize SIT to lease and operate as a common carrier on the same track. Without the requisite Board authority, rail service on the Line would cease, and no trains would operate on the Line. Therefore, potential environmental impacts associated with operation of the Line would not occur. Furthermore, the current shipper served by SIT would

lose access to rail service. Since the Line has already been constructed, the track would remain in place.

S.5.2 Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, the Board would authorize SIL's "after-the-fact" construction of the 11,404-foot rail line, as well as SIT's "after-the-fact" lease and operation of the same rail line as a common carrier. If the Board authorizes both actions, SIT would be able to operate the previously constructed rail line as a common carrier rail line and would be required to provide rail service to any shipper within the SGIH upon reasonable request.

As explained in this Draft EA, the Proposed Action would not involve any new rail construction, as the Line was constructed in 2020 (see **Section 2.2.1**). However, OEA analyzed both the potential impacts that could have resulted from construction of the Line, where possible, and the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line (see **Chapter 3**).

The impacts of the Proposed Action range from no impacts or *de minimis* to minimal impacts. The resources for which the Proposed Action would have no or *de minimis* impacts are:

- Air quality
- Energy
- Cultural resources
- Hazardous materials
- Transportation
- Land use
- Noise

The resources for which the Proposed Action would have minimal impacts are:

- Biological resources
- Water resources

S.5.3 Mitigation

OEA is preliminarily recommending one mitigation measure (**WAT-MM-1**) to minimize impacts from continued rail operations. To ensure all project-related culverts are clear of debris to avoid flow blockages, flow alteration, and increased flooding, OEA is recommending that the Board require SIT to inspect all project-related culverts semi-annually (or more frequently, as seasonal flows dictate) for debris accumulation and remove and properly dispose of debris promptly. OEA will make its final recommendations on mitigation to the Board in the Final EA after considering all public comments on this Draft EA.

S.6 Conclusion

OEA concludes that the Proposed Action would have negligible impacts on all environmental resource areas, except for biological resources and water resources. Due to the removal of forested habitat during construction of the Line, OEA concludes that the Proposed Action could

have had minor impacts on biological resources from construction of the Line and *de minimis* impacts from continued rail operations. Construction of the Line resulted in impacts to water resources that were previously mitigated with the purchase of compensatory mitigation credits from an approved mitigation bank and the use of appropriate Best Management Practices. If OEA's recommended mitigation measure (**WAT-MM-1**) is imposed, OEA also concludes that the Proposed Action would have negligible impacts on water resources from continued rail operations.

S.7 Draft EA Public Comment Period

This Draft EA is available for viewing and downloading on the Board's website (www.stb.gov). It can be accessed by clicking "Search STB Records" near the top of the home page and then searching for "Decisions" using Docket Numbers FD 36723 and FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1). In addition, a hard copy of the Draft EA is available at the local libraries identified in **Table 1-1** of the Draft EA. **Table 1-1** also includes the address, telephone, website, and operating hours for each location.

OEA invites comments on all aspects of this Draft EA and will consider all timely comments received. All comments on this Draft EA must be submitted by the comment due date, within the comment period, which will close in 30 days on **May 12, 2025**. When submitting comments on this Draft EA, OEA encourages commenters to be as specific as possible and to substantiate concerns and recommendations. Comments on this Draft EA may be submitted electronically through the Board's website at www.stb.gov by clicking on the "E-Filing" link on the left side of the home page and then selecting "Environmental Comments." Brief comments may be typed within the comment field provided, or longer comments may be attached as a separate file. Alternatively, comments on this Draft EA can be mailed to:

Karen Stevens
Surface Transportation Board
Environmental Filing, Docket Nos. FD 36723 and FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1)
395 E. Street SW
Washington, DC 20423

It is not necessary to mail written comments that have been filed electronically. Please refer to Docket No. FD 36723 or FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1) in all correspondence addressed to the Board, including all comments submitted on the Draft EA.

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Acronyms

AADT	Average Annual Dailly Traffic
APE	Area Of Potential Effects
AR-1	Agricultural Residential
B-2	General Commercial
ASTM	American Society for Testing and Materials
BGEPA	Bald And Golden Eagle Protection Act
BMPs	Best Management Practices
Board	Surface Transportation Board
CadnaA	Computer Aided Noise Abatement
C.F.R.	Code Of Federal Regulations
CLOMR	Conditional Letter Of Map Revision
CWA	Clean Water Act
CO	Carbon Monoxide
CRC	Coastal Regional Commission
CSS	Coastal Stormwater Supplement
CSXT	CSX Transportation, Inc.
CZMA	Coastal Zone Management Act
dBA	A-Weighted Decibels
DNL	Day-Night Average Noise Level
DNR	Georgia Department of Natural Resources
EA	Environmental Assessment
EDGES	Effects Determination Guidance for Endangered & Threatened Species
EDR	Environmental Data Resource
EPD	Environmental Protection Division
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FLCP	Florida Central & Peninsular Railroad
FR	Federal Register

FRA	Federal Railroad Administration
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
GCMP	Georgia Coastal Management Program
GDOT	Georgia Department of Transportation
GNAHRGIS	Georgia's Natural, Archaeological, And Historic Resources Geographic Information System
GRAD	Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development
I-1	Light Industrial
IPaC	Information For Planning and Consultation
LDM	Local Design Manual
Ldn	Day-Night Average Noise Level
LOS	Level Of Service
MBTA	Migratory Bird Treaty Act
MJ	Million Joules
MPC	Metropolitan Planning Commission
MPH	Miles Per Hour
NAAQS	National Ambient Air Quality Standards
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFA	No Further Action
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NOx	Oxides of Nitrogen
NRHP	National Register Of Historic Places
NSR	Norfolk Southern Railway
NWI	National Wetlands Inventory
NWP	Nationwide Permit
O_3	Ozone
OEA	Office Of Environmental Analysis
OmniTRAX	OmniTRAX Holding Combined, Inc.
OSHA	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
PD	Planned Development
PD-R	Residential Mixed Use
PM	Particulate Matter
$PM_{2.5}$	Particulate Matter with a Particle Diameter Less Than or Equal to 2.5 Microns

PM_{10}	Particulate Matter with A Particle Diameter Less Than or Equal to 10 Microns
RIBITS	Regulatory In-Lieu Fee and Bank Information Tracking System
SGIH	Savannah Gateway Industrial Hub
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
SPCC	Spill Prevention, Control, And Countermeasure
SIL	Savannah Industrial Logistics, LLC
SIT	Savannah Industrial Transportation, LLC
SO_2	Sulfur Dioxide
STB	Surface Transportation Board
SVAT	Savannah & Atlanta Railroad
THPO	Tribal Historic Preservation Officer
USACE	U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
U.S.C.	United States Code
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	United States Geological Survey
VdB	Vibration Decibels
VOCs	Volatile Organic Compounds
WOTUS	Waters Of the United States
WSE	Water Surface Elevation

Chapter 1
Purpose and Need

1.1 Introduction

On September 28, 2023, Savannah Industrial Logistics, LLC (SIL) filed a petition in Docket No. FD 36723 seeking authorization from the Surface Transportation Board (the Board) for after-the-fact authority to construct an 11,404 foot rail line in Effingham County, Georgia (the Line); and Savannah Industrial Transportation, LLC (SIT), an affiliate of SIL, filed for after-the-fact authority to lease and operate the same Line in Docket No. 36723 (Sub-No. 1). SIL and SIT are both holdings of OmniTRAX Holding Combined, Inc. (OmniTRAX). The Line, which is located in the Savannah Gateway Industrial Hub (SGIH), an industrial park, near the City of Rincon, provides dual access to two large Class I railroads, Norfolk Southern Railway (NSR) and CSX Transportation, Inc. (CSXT). The Line has no mileposts and extends from a connection with NSR to the west, near NSR milepost 16.6, to a connection with CSXT to the east, near CSXT milepost S484.0 (see **Figure 1-1**). The SGIH is located 12 miles from the Port of Savannah, Georgia and five miles northwest of Interstate 95 (I-95), the main north-south interstate on the East Coast.

1.1.1 Background

Construction and operation of new common carrier rail lines require prior authorization by the Board, either through an application under 49 U.S.C. § 10901 or an exemption from the formal application requirements of § 10901 under § 10502. However, the Line already exists because it was constructed and leased without the requisite Board authority.

These proceedings began on May 12, 2021, when SIT filed a petition for an exemption in Docket No. 36489 to operate as a common carrier over track leased from SIL. OmniTRAX and SIL had previously constructed the Line as a part of a larger project to construct the SGIH, without seeking Board authorization or undergoing environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321-4370m-11, and historic review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), 54 U.S.C. § 306108, by the Board. On August 1, 2023, the Board served a decision finding that SIT and its parent company, OmniTRAX, intended to operate and were operating the Line as a common carrier rail line for which Board authority should have been obtained under 49 U.S.C. § 10901 or § 10502 before construction and operation commenced.[2] The Board therefore held SIT's petition in abeyance, ordered SIL to file for after-the-fact construction authority, and ordered SIT to file for after-the-fact acquisition authority. The Board also granted SIT a limited exemption to continue providing service to any shippers located on the track as of August 1, 2023, during the pendency of the construction and acquisition proceedings.[3] As noted above, on September 28, 2023, SIL

[2] Savannah Indus. Transp., LLC—Operation Exemption—in Effingham Cnty., Ga. (August 2023 Decision), FD 36489, slip op. at 4, 6 (STB served Aug. 1, 2023).

[3] On August 30, 2023, SIT informed the Board that as of that date it was providing rail service to only one shipper on the Line, Quantix SCS, Inc. f/k/a A&R Logistics, Inc (Quantix). (SIT Suppl. 1, Aug. 30, 2023, FD 36489.)

petitioned the Board for a construction exemption in Docket No. FD 36723, and SIT petitioned the Board for a lease and operation exemption in Docket No. FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1).[4] On February 9, 2024, SIL and SIT filed a petition for clarification or other relief seeking Board authority to serve additional shippers during the pending construction and lease and operation proceedings, which the Board denied.[5]

Before deciding whether to authorize the after-the-fact construction and lease and operation of the Line, the Board must consider the impacts of that decision on the environment. The after-the-fact environmental and historic review of the construction and operation of the Line is provided in this Draft Environmental Assessment (Draft EA).

1.2 Purpose and Need

The after-the-fact construction, lease, and operation of the Line has not been proposed or sponsored by the federal government. Notably, the Line was constructed and leased without the required Board authority. Here, the proposed federal action is the Board's decision to approve with appropriate conditions, or deny, SIL's request for after-the fact authority to construct approximately 11,404 feet of rail line, and SIT's request for after-the-fact authority to lease and operate the same line. If the Board grants SIL and SIT's petitions, SIT would be able to operate the approximately 11,404 feet of previously constructed rail line as a common carrier. As a common carrier, SIT would be required to provide rail service to any shipper upon reasonable request. 49 U.S.C. § 11101(a)

The purpose and need for the Line is informed by the goals of SIL and SIT in conjunction with the Board's enabling statute—sections 10502 and 10901 of the Interstate Commerce Act, as amended by the ICC Termination Act, Pub. L. No. 104-188, 109 State. 803 (1996). According to SIL and SIT, the purpose of the Proposed Action is to ensure the development and continuation of a sound rail transportation system and to provide alternative transportation options for all current and future tenants at the SGIH, which would benefit from nearby connections to two large Class I rail carriers (NSR and CSXT) as well as I-95 and the nearby Port of Savannah. SIL and SIT state that the Proposed Action would maintain and enhance competition among rail carriers and with other transportation modes.

1.3 Role of the Board

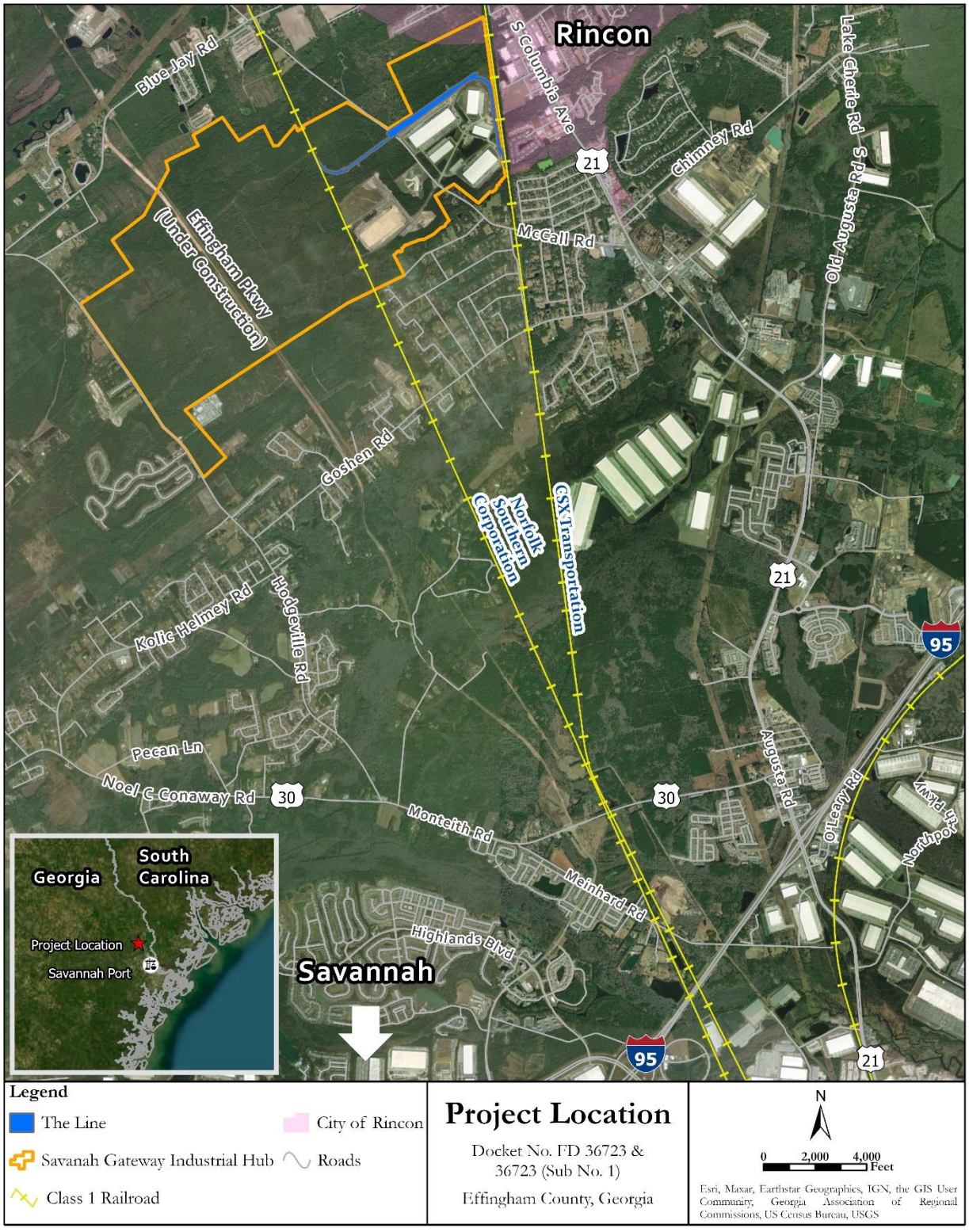
The Board is a nonpartisan, federal regulatory agency, composed of five presidentially appointed Members confirmed by the Senate.[6] The Board has jurisdiction over certain rail transportation

[4] Additional background information can be found in the Board's decisions in Docket Nos. FD 36489, FD 36723, and FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1). These decisions and related filings can be found on the Board's website at www.stb.gov.

[5] Savannah Industrial Transp., LLC—Operation Exemption—In Effingham Co., Ga., FD 36489, slip op. at 3 (STB served May 28, 2024). There, the Board reiterated that its August 2023 decision "clearly prohibits SIT from providing rail transportation on the Line to anyone other than Quantix, the single shipper that was already located on the Line and receiving rail service from SIT as of August 1, 2023" until SIT obtains the needed Board authority.

[6] The Board is currently composed of four Members with one vacancy.

Figure 1-1 Project Location Map



matters, including the construction and operation of new rail lines. The Board licenses railroads as common carriers, requiring them to accept goods and materials for transport from all customers upon reasonable request (49 U.S.C. § 11101(a)).

1.4 NEPA and NHPA Process

The Board is required to examine the potential environmental and historic impacts of actions subject to its licensing authority under NEPA, NHPA, and related environmental laws. The environmental and historic review process is intended to assist the Board and the public in identifying and assessing the potential environmental and historic consequences of a Proposed Action. The Board's Office of Environmental Analysis (OEA) is the office within the Board responsible for ensuring the agency's compliance with NEPA, NHPA, and related environmental laws and regulations.

As part of the environmental review process, OEA makes recommendations to the Board regarding measures for mitigating potential adverse environmental impacts that could occur as a result of a Board decision. Environmental mitigation measures may include voluntary measures developed by railroad applicants and additional measures recommended by OEA. When making its final decision in this case, the Board will consider OEA's conclusions regarding environmental impacts and OEA's final recommendations for mitigation.

1.4.1 Determination to Prepare an Environmental Assessment

Based on information provided by SIL and SIT,[7] as well as comments received during consultation with federal, state, and local agencies and Tribes conducted in May and June of 2024, OEA determined that the preparation of an Environmental Assessment (EA), instead of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), is appropriate in this case under 49 C.F.R. §1105.6(d).[8] OEA granted SIL and SIT's request for a waiver of the preparation of an EIS on August 7, 2024, for the following reasons:

- OEA conducted preliminary agency and Tribal consultation and requested formal comments by June 5, 2024. Minimal concerns regarding the project were raised.
- OEA visited the project area on June 25, 2024, to better understand existing conditions. OEA found that the project area is currently disturbed; development of the SGIH has been proceeding independently of rail line access; and the Line, as noted above, has

[7] Surface Transportation Board, (Aug. 29, 2024) (Environmental Comment EI-33619), FD-36723 and FD-36723 (Sub-No. 1). Accessed: https://www.stb.gov/proceedings-actions/dockets and-service-lists/

[8] While the Board's regulations under 49 C.F.R. §1105.6(a) state that EISs will normally be prepared for rail construction projects, under 49 C.F.R. §1105.6(d), the Board may reclassify or modify these requirements for individual proceedings. In practice, OEA prepares EAs for construction projects where it does not expect impacts to be significant.

already been constructed.[9] Moreover, some environmental review for the Line was completed prior to construction.[10]

- OEA understands that approximately one train is currently moving on the Line, and that the projected number of trains was expected to remain the same.[11] Due to the small volume of expected rail traffic, the potential for impacts related to air quality, safety, and noise during rail operations are expected to be low.

1.5 Agency and Tribal Consultation

On May 6, 2024, OEA consulted with relevant federal, state, and local agencies, and Tribes. OEA sent letters to 45 agency and Tribal contacts providing background information on the Proposed Action. The consultation letter, along with a list of agencies and Tribes consulted, is provided in **Appendix A**. OEA gave the agencies and Tribes a 30-day timeframe to provide comments to assist OEA in identifying potential impacts and any additional concerns associated with the Proposed Action.

OEA received nine comments from agencies, including comments from Effingham County Schools, Savannah Chatham County Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC), and the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) (see **Appendix A**). This Draft EA contains an appropriate analysis of resource areas raised in the comments, including safety of the at-grade crossing and noise into the environmental and historic analysis, in **Chapter 3**.

Section 106 Consultation

OEA has assessed the potential effects of the Proposed Action on historic properties that are listed in or are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), as required by Section 106 of the NHPA. As a part of agency coordination efforts, OEA initiated consultation with the Georgia State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs), and Tribal governments with a possible interest in the Proposed

[9] As shown in **Figure 2-1**, five sites have been fully developed east of McCall Road. Land has been cleared west of McCall Road and Blanford Elementary school for additional sites. According to the SGIH website (https://savannahgatewayindustrialhub.com/), rail and non-rail sites are available with the ability to develop over 18 million square feet of logistics facilities.

[10] Prior environmental review included a Development Plan Application, a Wetland Survey, a Habitat Assessment for Threatened and Endangered Species, a Cultural Resources Survey, a Traffic Impact Study, a Sewer and Reuse Water Master Plan, a Drainage Report, and an Environmental Site Assessment. More information on the environmental reviews completed prior to construction is discussed in **Chapter 3** *Affected Environment and Environmental Impacts*.

[11] After the determination was made to prepare an EA, SIL and SIT updated current and projected operation information in response to an information request. The revised information provided the following: SIT operates one round trip (one train, two train movements) five days per week to interchange with NSR and one round trip (one train, two train movements) five days per week to interchange with CSXT for a total of two trains per day. By 2029, SIL and SIT projects SIT would operate four trains per day. OEA reviewed the updated information and found 1) the projected train traffic would remain low, and 2) the potential for impacts related to air quality, safety, and noise during operations were still expected to be low. Therefore, OEA determined preparation of an EA was still adequate.

Action. OEA consulted and coordinated with the Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town, Catawba Indian Tribe of South Carolina, Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and Seminole Tribe of Florida. No responses were received from the Tribes. In a letter dated June 4, 2024, OEA received a response from the Georgia SHPO concluding that the Proposed Action would have No Adverse Effect to historic properties located within the Area of Potential Effect for the Proposed Action, as defined in 36 C.F.R. Part 800.5(d)(1), due to the scope and location of the work, existing modern intrusions, and previous ground disturbance. (See **Appendix A**).

Section 7 Consultation

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is the federal agency with primary expertise in fish, wildlife, and natural resource issues. USFWS is responsible for implementing the Endangered Species Act (ESA) (16 U.S.C. §§ 1531-1544), and it is also responsible for implementing the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. §§ 703-712) and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA) (16 U.S.C. §§ 668-668d). Under Section 7 of the ESA, OEA initiated consultation with USFWS regarding the potential effects of the Proposed Action on ESA-listed species that may occur in the project area. OEA received a response from USFWS, dated May 9, 2024, stating that the project is not expected to impact ESA listed species. See **Section 3.6** for more information. See **Appendix A** for the species list, consistency letter, and USFWS response.

1.6 Requests for Comments and Next Steps

This Draft EA examines existing environmental conditions and potential environmental and historic impacts associated with the Proposed Action and the No-Action Alternative, consistent with NEPA, and other relevant environmental laws. This Draft EA will be available to the public for a 30-day comment period that ends on **May 12, 2025**. Interested agencies, Tribes, individuals, and other stakeholders are encouraged to submit detailed and substantive comments on this Draft EA during the 30-day comment period. A physical copy of the Draft EA is available for review at the local library and town hall identified in **Table 1-1**.

Table 1-1 Draft EA Hard Copy Locations

Rincon Library 105 W 17th St, Rincon, GA 31326 Phone: 912-826-222 https://www.liveoakpl.org/home Hours: Tuesday through Friday 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 pm; Monday 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.; Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
City of Rincon Municipal Building 302 S Columbia Ave, Rincon, GA 31326 Phone: 912-826-5745 https://www.cityofrincon.com/ Hours: Monday through Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Interested parties are encouraged to file their written comments electronically through the Board's website, www.stb.gov, by clicking on the "File an Environmental Comment" link. Please refer to Docket Numbers FD 36723 and FD 36723 (Sub-No.1) in all correspondence, including e-filings, addressed to the Board. Comments also may be submitted by mail, addressed to:

Karen Stevens
Surface Transportation Board
Environmental Filing, Docket Nos. FD 36723 and FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1)
395 E. Street SW
Washington, DC 20423

It is not necessary to mail written comments that have been filed electronically. Please refer to Docket Nos. FD 36723 and FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1) in all correspondence, including all comments submitted to OEA on the Draft EA.

Comments on this Draft EA must be received or postmarked within the published comment period, which will close in 30 days on **May 12, 2025**. All comments received—mailed or e-filed—will carry equal weight in helping to complete the EA process and guide the Board in making a decision in these proceedings. If you require an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act, please call (202) 245-0245.

Following the close of the comment period on the Draft EA, OEA will issue a Final EA that will consider and respond to all comments received on the Draft EA and make any modifications necessary to the existing environmental analysis. The Final EA will set forth OEA's final recommended environmental mitigation measures to the Board. The Board will then consider the entire record, including the record on the transportation merits, the Draft EA, the Final EA, all public comments received, and OEA's final recommended environmental mitigation measures in making its final decision in these proceedings. The Board's final decision will determine whether to authorize the after-the-fact construction and operation of the Line, and if so, what, if any, environmental mitigation conditions to impose.

Chapter 2
Proposed Action and Alternatives

Based on the Board's August 1, 2023 decision, the purpose and need for the Proposed Action, information provided by OmniTRAX, comments received to date, and OEA's independent analysis, OEA has carried forward the Proposed Action and the No-Action Alternative for detailed analysis in this Draft EA. Because the Line has already been constructed, OEA concluded that there are no additional alternatives to analyze in this Draft EA.

2.1 Overview of Existing Rail Operations

Currently, SIT provides rail service to one customer within the SGIH.[12] CSXT and NSR deliver and pick up rail cars (i.e., interchange) with SIT. SIT operates approximately one round trip (one train, two train movements) five days per week to interchange with NSR and one round trip (one train, two train movements) five days per week to interchange with CSXT for a total of two trains per day. Loaded trains move from the interchange with NSR or CSXT towards the SIT yard, and empty trains move from the SIT yard to NSR or CSXT. SIT currently operates Monday through Friday from 5:00 AM until 2:00 PM. NSR interchange occurs before noon and CSXT interchange occurs after noon. SIT switches customer rail cars and builds trains to interchange beginning at approximately 5:30 AM until complete. During morning peak traffic, SIT does not block the only at-grade crossing located on the Line at McCall Road.

SIT trains typically consist of approximately 10 railcars, spanning 720 feet. Average train speeds reach a maximum of approximately 10 miles per hour (mph) at the McCall Road crossing. Current annual gross inbound tonnage consists of approximately 715,000 tons, while annual gross outbound tonnage consists of approximately 176,000 tons. According to SIT, when the locomotives are not in use, they are shut down; thus, there are no idling locomotives.

2.2 Proposed Action

This Draft EA analyzes two proposed federal actions—whether to authorize "after-the-fact" SIL's construction of the 11,404 foot rail line, and whether to authorize "after-the-fact" SIT's lease and operation of the same rail line as a common carrier. If the Board authorizes both actions, SIL and SIT would be able to operate the previously constructed rail line as a common carrier rail line and would be required to provide rail service to any shipper within the SGIH upon reasonable request.

2.2.1 Construction

The constructed rail line is approximately 11,404 feet in length. The eastern terminus of the Line connects with CSXT, near CSXT milepost S484.0. The Line extends in a westerly direction approximately 2.15 miles to its western terminus, a connection with NSR, near NSR milepost 16.6. (see **Figure 1-1**). Construction of the Line required crossing McCall Road, which was accomplished with the construction of an at-grade crossing with passive warning devices (stop

[12] See Savannah Industrial Transp., LLC—Operation Exemption—In Effingham Co., Ga., FD 36489, slip op. at 3 (STB served May 28, 2024).

signs and crossbucks) that comply with the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (FHWA, 2025).

In this Draft EA, OEA uses the following terms to describe the area where construction occurred and where operation of the Line occurs.

Rail line footprint. The rail line footprint includes the area of the railbed, as well as other physical structures installed during construction of the Line, such as the SGIH rail yard (consisting of three tracks, spaced 15 feet apart from centerline, with two tracks to the south and one track to the north of the Line), an access road (extending the entire length of the Line), and a ballast walkway. Rail operations occur in the rail line footprint.

Temporary footprint. The temporary footprint is the area that was temporarily disturbed during construction. The temporary footprint was reclaimed and revegetated following construction.

Project footprint. The project footprint is the combined area of the rail line footprint and temporary footprint, both of which were disturbed during construction.

Because the Line has already been constructed, OEA estimated the area of disturbance that resulted from construction of the Line. **Table 2-1** provides the length and area of the rail line footprint, temporary footprint, and project footprint.

Table 2-1 Length and Footprints from Construction of the Line

Length (feet)	Rail Line Footprint (acres)	Temporary Footprint (acres)	Project Footprint (acres)
11,404	15.6	25	40.6

Construction of the Line required removal of vegetation, clearing, and grading. Once the grading was completed, eight-inch subballast and eight-inch ballast layers were placed to create an approximately 24-foot-wide rail bed. Eight-foot by six-inch wooden rail ties and rails were then placed to form the Line. An access road, approximately 12-feet wide, was constructed of compacted ballast material for maintenance and inspection of the Line. A 320-foot long and 10-foot wide ballast walkway was constructed from the eastern terminus of the access road to the Sweigoffer Creek bridge for inspection and maintenance of the bridge. Staging areas used during construction were located in upland areas (United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Permit No. SAS-2003-20390).

The Line and access road required crossing Willowpeg Creek and 8 other unnamed drainages during construction. Culverts were placed at 18 sites at various locations along the Line to cross drainages or provide drainage (OmniTRAX, Construction Drawings).

As previously noted, construction of the SGIH has continued independent of the rail line.[13] According to the SGIH website and conceptual plan, the SGIH development is divided into four areas. Area 1 is between the CSXT line and McCall Road. Land south of the Line in this area has

[13] SGIH is a 2,600-acre multimodal logistics park with active development underway. As part of the Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD) Program, SGIH offers sites of various sizes and configurations that are fast-tracked for construction.

been developed, and current tenants of the SGIH are located here, including the current shipper. Area 2 is between McCall Road and the NSR line. The land east of the Line has been cleared and graded and was being prepared for construction during OEA's June 2024 site visit. Area 3 is between the NSR Line and Effingham Parkway (which is currently under construction). During OEA's site visit, vegetation removal was actively occurring in this area, with most of it already removed. Area 4 is between Effingham Parkway and Hodgeville Road. At the time of OEA's site visit, no development was occurring. See Map in **Figure 2-1** below.

2.2.2 Operation and Maintenance

OmniTRAX states that the Proposed Action would maintain and enhance competition among carriers and with other transportation modes. According to SIL and SIT, SIT currently transports 5,500 railcars per year, which could expand to up to 20,000 railcars in the next five years depending on the SGIH tenants and their demand for rail transportation by the end of the Board's forecast year (2029).[14] With the availability of common carrier freight rail service, SIL and SIT would be able to add additional shippers beyond the current existing shipper authorized by the Board.

As noted above, OmniTRAX states that current operations consist of two trains totaling four movements per day that interchange with CSXT and NSR. If the Board authorizes the Proposed Action, SIT estimates the existing rail traffic on the Line would increase by two trains per day (to a total of four trains, eight movements per day) by 2029.

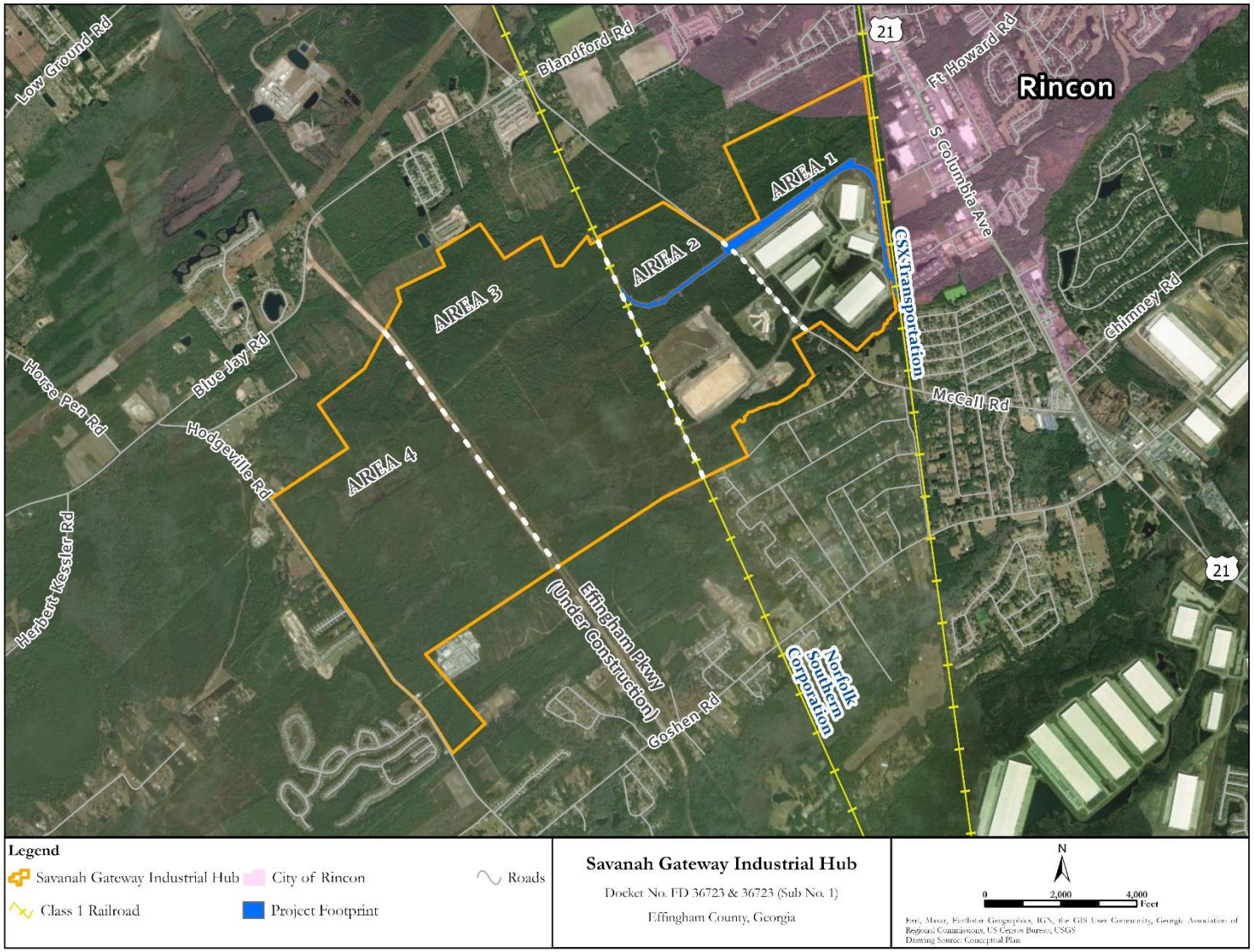
SIT projects the annual gross tonnage by 2029 to be approximately 2,345 thousand tons inbound to the SIT yard and approximately 640 thousand outbound towards either NSR or CSXT, an increase of approximately 335 percent over the current annual gross tonnage.

2.3 No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize "after-the-fact" SIL's construction of the Line, nor would the Board authorize SIT to lease and operate as a common carrier on the same track. Without the requisite Board authority, rail service on the Line would cease, thus no trains would operate on the Line. The current shipper served by SIT would lose access to rail service within the SGIH. Since the Line has already been constructed, the track would remain in place. While the only at-grade crossing located on the Line at McCall Road would remain in place, traffic on McCall Road would not be delayed due to train traffic because no trains would be operating on the Line.

[14] The Board uses a 5-year forecast to estimate changes in rail traffic.

Figure 2-1 Savannah Gateway Industrial Hub



Chapter 3
Affected Environment and Environmental Impacts

This chapter describes the affected environment, estimates the impact of construction of the Line in 2020, where possible, and evaluates the potential impacts from the Line's continued operation (Proposed Action) or cessation of operations (No-Action Alternative) for each resource. OEA analyzed the environmental resource areas set forth in the Board's environmental regulations at 49 C.F.R. § 1105.7(e).

OEA took the following steps to analyze each resource:[15]

- Reviewed regulations and guidance relevant to each resource, which are described in applicable sections.
- Defined a study area or study areas to be analyzed.
- Developed analysis approaches.
- Reviewed the current conditions of the resource in the relevant study area(s).
- Analyzed the potential impacts that the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative would or could have on the resource.
- Identified mitigation that would minimize or compensate for impacts, if warranted.

OEA will make its final environmental recommendations to the Board, including its final recommendations on mitigation, in the Final EA, after considering agency and public comments on the Draft EA. The Board will consider OEA's final recommendations when deciding whether or not to authorize the Proposed Action – after-the-fact SIL's construction of the 11,404 foot rail line, and after-the-fact SIT's lease and operation of the same rail line as a common carrier.

3.1 Transportation and Safety

This section addresses existing rail and transportation conditions as well as impacts that could have resulted from construction of the Line and the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. McCall Road is the only at-grade crossing within the project footprint, which includes the total area of disturbance (temporary and permanent) from construction of the Line (see **Section 2.2.1**). The subsections below provide a summary of the traffic analyses used, including the study area, data sources, and methods used to analyze the impacts, as well as the affected environment, including the estimated impacts of construction and the potential impacts of continued rail operations on vehicle safety and delay. The full analysis, including assumptions and calculations, for this analysis are included in **Appendix B**.

3.1.1 Approach

OEA defined the study area for this analysis as the at-grade crossing at McCall Road. The operational traffic analysis evaluated the at-grade crossing at McCall Road: under the current

[15] OEA used the best available data to inform its analyses. These data may not reflect all recent changes in conditions that have taken place due to the rapid development in the project vicinity.

scenario (2024) and under the future scenario (2029) for the No-Action Alternative and the Proposed Action.

The current scenario represents road traffic conditions that existed in the year 2024. The roadway traffic volumes were developed assuming a 2 percent annual growth rate from the 2020 base year used in the Lowe Engineers Savannah Gateway Traffic Impact Study prepared on August 30, 2019. (Note: Although referred to as 2020 volumes, they were determined based on 2019 counts and were not impacted by Covid related traffic reductions.)

The future scenario represents future conditions in the year 2029. The future 2029 Proposed Action and No-Action scenarios reflect no changes in roadway or railroad geometrics. The McCall Road grade crossing remains in place. Roadway traffic volumes are assumed to increase by 2 percent per year from 2024 to 2029 under both scenarios.

The grade crossing delay analysis includes two general components: one focused on individual train crossings and one focused on cumulative events over an entire day. The performance measures for individual train crossings include blocked crossing time per train, crossing delay per stopped vehicle, and maximum vehicle queue. The performance measures for cumulative events over an entire day include the number of vehicles delayed per day, average delay for all vehicles, and level of service (LOS) for vehicular traffic. For simplicity, it is assumed that both rail and road traffic are uniform throughout the day using the average daytime hour.

LOS is a qualitative measure of motor vehicle traffic flow, indicated by letters from A to F, where A represents free flow conditions and F indicates extreme congestion. OEA calculated estimated delay time using the industry standard equations set forth in **Appendix B**, which include the following variables: Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT), train speed, train length, number of trains per day, number of railroad tracks, and number of roadway lanes. The average delay per vehicle is used to assign an LOS based on the standards shown in Error! Reference s ource not found. below.

Table 3-1 LOS Thresholds and Standards[16]

LOS	Average Delay per Vehicle (sec/veh)	General description
A	DV < 10	Free flow
B	10 < DV < 20	Stable flow (slight delays)
C	20 < DV < 35	Stable flow (acceptable delays)
D	35 < DV < 55	Congested flow nearing capacity
E	55 < DV < 80	Unstable flow, slightly over capacity
F	80 < DV	High level of delays & queuing, forced flow

[16] Highway Capacity Manual, Sixth Edition: A Guide for Multimodal Mobility Analysis. (Transportation Research Board 2016) Note: LOS criteria shown was developed and is used for traffic signals based on average delay per vehicle during peak hour of operations. Same criteria table is used for grade crossings based on average delay per vehicle over 24 hours.

OEA specifically considered the impact of delays on emergency vehicles as well. In addition to delay, OEA considered site-specific conditions, including the current road network, alternative routes available, and the locations of nearby emergency service stations (see **Appendix B**).

3.1.2 Affected Environment

For the transportation analysis in this Draft EA, OEA calculated current AADT levels as 5,990 vehicles per day using the 2020 base year with a two percent annual growth rate. The current tracks support a single shipper within the SGIH, served by two trains with 10 rail cars each per day or 5,500 railroad cars per year. Rail traffic is split evenly between CSXT and NSR with only half of SIT trains, or one train per day, needing to cross McCall Road. No electronic warning devices exist at the grade crossing. Using Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) methodologies and equations, OEA determined that current average daytime hour delays total approximately 1.3 minutes per vehicle on McCall Road. Average blocked time for emergency vehicles was determined to be 2.6 minutes per crossing event.

3.1.3 Environmental Consequences

As explained below, construction of the Line likely resulted in impacts to transportation delay and safety due to the movement of construction equipment, materials, and workers. Continued operation of the Line under the Proposed Action would result in minimal impacts to transportation and safety. Under the No-Action Alternative, potential impacts would decrease as no trains would operate on the Line.

Construction

The McCall Road at-grade crossing is the sole at-grade crossing created by the Line's construction. The crossing is located directly west of the auxiliary tracks associated with the Line. The number of mainline tracks at the crossing is one track and the number of roadway lanes at the crossing is two lanes. Prior to construction of the Line, two studies were conducted as part of the development of the SGIH property 1) in 2010 and 2) in the previously referenced the Traffic Impact Study in 2019.

The traffic impact study conducted in 2019 considered two traffic scenarios as part of the analysis: traffic without the project and traffic with the project. The future year scenarios considered the opening year for the project (2020) and used 2019 traffic counts projected to year 2020. This study determined that delays by project-generated trips were expected to be minimal, with traffic operations at McCall Road determined to have an LOS of A or B.

Although the Line has already been constructed, construction likely required trips for the movement of materials, equipment, and workers to and from work sites, construction staging areas, and construction camps. These construction-related vehicle trips could have increased vehicle delays on local roadways. A temporary complete closure of McCall Road also likely occurred to accommodate construction of the at-grade crossing. The level of impact would have depended on the increase in construction vehicle traffic and the available capacity of the roadways in the project study area and larger transportation system. In addition, some temporary delays could have occurred on portions of existing roads during construction due to temporary road closures required for the construction of the at-grade crossing.

School traffic times at Blandford Elementary School, located directly west of McCall Road, occur Monday through Friday from 7:00 to 8:00 AM and 2:20 to 3:00 PM. Therefore, school traffic may have been disrupted and delayed due to construction-related vehicle trips.

Operations

SIT estimates that, if the Board authorizes the Proposed Action, the current rail traffic on the Line would increase by two trains per day (to a total of four trains, eight movements per day), or twenty trains per week, by 2029. Because SIT only crosses the at-grade crossing to service cars from the NSR line to the west, OEA assumed that only half the total number of trains would serve the NSR line. Therefore, OEA analyzed ten trains per week (or two trains per day) for the 2029 future scenario.

Although NSR delivers cars on Saturdays rather than Mondays, OEA assumed that rail crossings necessitating stops on McCall Road would occur on weekdays during daylight hours only, a period that reflects higher traffic volumes and therefore conservatively provides a higher estimate of demand. OEA assumed that, on average, 8 percent of the total daily traffic occurs during the peak hours. While current operations indicate that trains reach a maximum of approximately 10 miles per hour at the McCall Road crossing, OEA used 5 miles per hour for a more conservative approach. OEA's methodology, including a full list of assumptions can be found in **Appendix B**.

To estimate train length, OEA used information regarding rail volume received from SIL and SIT. SIT projected an increase in rail car volumes from 5,500 carloads in 2024 to 20,000 carloads in 2029.

Based on the information provided by SIL and SIT, SIT's continued operation of the Line under the Proposed Action would most likely result in 20 long trains crossing the at-grade crossing at McCall Road per week with a length of 20 cars per train.[17]

A summary of the railroad operations and assumptions for the current (2024) and future (2029) scenarios is shown below in **Table 3-2**. The No-Action Alternative scenario is not reflected in this table, as rail operations would cease under this scenario. The analysis focuses on the impact of a single rail crossing event and does not depend on the volume of vehicular traffic on McCall Road or the number of trains.

Table 3-2 Rail Volumes and Operational Impacts of Single Train Crossing of McCall Road

Year	Description/ Assumptions	Rail Carloads per Year	Trains per Week	Average Length of Train (# of cars)	Length of Train (ft) - assumes 75 ft per car + 100 ft locomotive
2024 Current: QUANTIX in Current Stage: Est. 5,500 Rail Cars Per Year					
2024	data computed	5,500	10	10.6	893
Proposed Action QUANTIX & 3 Additional Companies: Up To 20,000 Rail Car Loads Per Year					
2029	20 trains/week	20,000	20	19.2	1,542

[17] (Aug. 29, 2024) (Env't Comment EI-33619), FD-36723 and FD-36723 (Sub-No. 1).

Using information provided from OmniTRAX and the assumptions to estimate train length from **Table 3-2**, OEA calculated delays over an entire day (24 hours).[18] **Table 3-3** below shows the impacts of SIT's continued operation of the Line under the Proposed Action (20 long trains per week) for events over an entire day (24 hours) and the corresponding LOS. OEA anticipates LOS A for 2029 operations based upon average daily delay per vehicle of 2.7 seconds per vehicle. Therefore, impacts on the roadway system for the Proposed Action scenario would be minimal.

Table 3-3 Proposed Action Total Crossing Delay per Vehicle and Level of Service for 24 Hour Standard

Year	Description/ Assumptions	Average Length of Train (cars)	Delays and LOS over 24 Hours (Required Rail Crossing Measure & Comparison)			
			Total Crossing Delay (min/day)	Average Vehicles per Day (vpd)	Average Delay per Vehicle in 24 hours (sec/veh)	LOS over 24 hours
2024	data computed	10.6	59.8	5,990	0.6	A
Proposed Action QUANTIX & 3 Additional Companies: Up To 20,000 rail cars per year						
2029	20 trains/week	19.2	321.7	7,159	2.7	A

OEA also considered the potential impacts of continued operation of the Line under the Proposed Action on potential emergency vehicle delays. OEA conducted an analysis of emergency response time if the McCall Road crossing were closed, or if an emergency response vehicle arrived at the crossing at the same time a train began crossing and was forced to wait. In 2029, the blocked crossing time is estimated to be 4.1 minutes (with approx. 20 cars/train). Although unlikely, OEA also analyzed a scenario where an emergency incident causes a closure at the crossing itself, forcing vehicles to travel a different route. This analysis is summarized in **Appendix B, Table 9**.

Coordination with GDOT, local transportation agencies and the Blandford Elementary School likely occurred during the construction of the at-grade crossing warning devices. For the rare and unpredictable events that could stop a train and result in a blocked crossing, there are already Emergency Notification Systems signs at the at-grade crossing. The sign includes a toll-free phone number to contact the railroad. FRA provides guidance and resources to law enforcement and first responders on what to do in the event of an emergency at an at-grade crossing, such as a stopped train. Examples include:

1. Contact the railroad responsible for the track,
2. Determine if the incident involves a trespasser or a motor vehicle, and
3. Determine if there are additional dangers such as a motor vehicle on the track or hazardous cargo.

FRA recommends that law enforcement and emergency responders become familiar with the railroads operating in their jurisdiction, including the types of products regularly transported.

[18] Id.

Further, FRA recommends that emergency dispatchers develop a policy for handling railroad incidents and maintain a map of all railroads and crossings in the area.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts beyond what has already been described in the construction subsection above. Under the No-Action Alternative, rail service on the Line would cease, and there would be fewer impacts to grade-crossing delay and safety.

3.1.4 Conclusion

Construction of the Line likely had temporary impacts to vehicle delay. Additionally, OEA concludes that impacts to grade crossing delay would be negligible, while emergency vehicle delay would have a minor impact to transportation and safety as a result of the continued operation of the Line under the Proposed Action. Continued operation of the Line over a 24-hour period would have no impact as delays would continue to reflect LOS A operations over 24 hours. Therefore, OEA concludes that minimal impacts would occur to transportation and safety due to the potential emergency vehicle delay.

3.2 Land Use, Zoning, and Local Plans

This section describes the impacts on land use, zoning, and local plans that could have resulted from construction of the Line and the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. Land uses considered in this analysis include land use patterns, land use plans and authorizations, and designated recreational areas. The subsections that follow describe the study area, methods used to analyze the impacts, the affected environment, and the impacts of the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative on land use.

3.2.1 Approach

OEA reviewed documents provided by SIL and SIT related to the previous development and construction of the Line. Additionally, OEA reviewed the Effingham County 2020-2040 Joint Comprehensive Plan, and site plans and local zoning maps for Effingham County and the City of Rincon. The existing land uses were documented through field observations and land use maps. A list of documents provided by SIL and SIT used to evaluate impacts to land use are provided below:

- Development of Regional Impact Findings Report prepared by the Coastal Regional Commission (CRC) of Georgia for Effingham County dated July 5, 2012,
- Effingham County Development Plan Review Application completed by Savannah Industrial District dated March 19, 2020, and
- Site Development Plans for SGIH first submittal for Effingham County Review dated May 15, 2020.

To assess the potential impacts related to land use associated with the Proposed Action and the No-Action Alternative, OEA defined the study area as the project footprint, which includes the total area of disturbance (temporary and permanent) from construction of the Line (see **Section 2.2.1**) located within an unincorporated area of Effingham County, bordering the City of Rincon to the west.

3.2.2 Affected Environment

At the time of the 2012 Regional Impact Findings Report, the zoning of the SGIH property was residential mixed use (PD-R) and planned development (PD). Effingham County then amended the zoning of the property to industrial use (I-1) in 2012.[19] Surrounding properties were largely considered developed, and a location along Blue Jay Road directly north of the SGIH property was identified as an 'area of significant infill opportunity,' where new construction could occur. Adjacent properties to the north and south of the SGIH were designated as agricultural (AR-1),[20] with some considered undeveloped and residential.

The study area is located between two Class I rail lines within the SGIH in an unincorporated area of Effingham County and is characterized as primarily rural. The SGIH, including the study area, is zoned Light Industrial (I-1) **(**see **Figure 3-1**). Effingham County defined Light Industrial (I-1) zoning in the 2020-2040 Joint Comprehensive Plan (October 2019) as:

> "…land dedicated to manufacturing facilities, processing plants, factories, warehousing and wholesale trade facilities, mining or mineral extraction activities, or other similar uses" and "land dedicated to transportation and utilities uses. It can accommodate transportation infrastructure and public and private utilities including but not limited to, power lines, water and wastewater facilities, electrical substations."[21]

As part of Effingham County's Comprehensive Plan, the county classified the SGIH as I-1 because it was looking to "promote the expansion of job opportunities, high quality industry and diversification of the employment base to help the county grow beyond a bedroom community and to establish itself as a place to do business." Furthermore, the county was looking to "implement and expand economic development plans to diversify the county economy and promote the recruitment of high-quality commercial industrial businesses."

The area to the east of the Line is part of the City of Rincon and zoned as General Commercial (B-2).[1] The B-2 zone permits business and professional offices, mixed-use residential, institutional uses, and retail business. No commercial outdoor storage businesses are permitted in this zone.

The nearest residence (Effingham Parc Apartments) is located approximately 200 feet east of the CSXT rail line (see **Figure 3-2**). The nearest recreation site, Freedom Park, is approximately 350 feet from the study area, separated from the Proposed Action by the CSXT rail line. The Proposed Action includes one at-grade crossing, which is located at McCall Road. Blandford Elementary School is located approximately 1,400 feet from this at-grade crossing.

[19] This zoning is consistent with the Effingham County 2020-2024 Joint Comprehensive Plan.

[20] Effingham County Zoning Ordinance (https://library.municode.com/ga/effingham_county/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIIOFCO_APXCZOOR_ARTIVESDI).

[21] Effingham County 2020-2040 Joint Comprehensive Plan, pages 28-29, October 2019.

Figure 3-1 Zoning Map

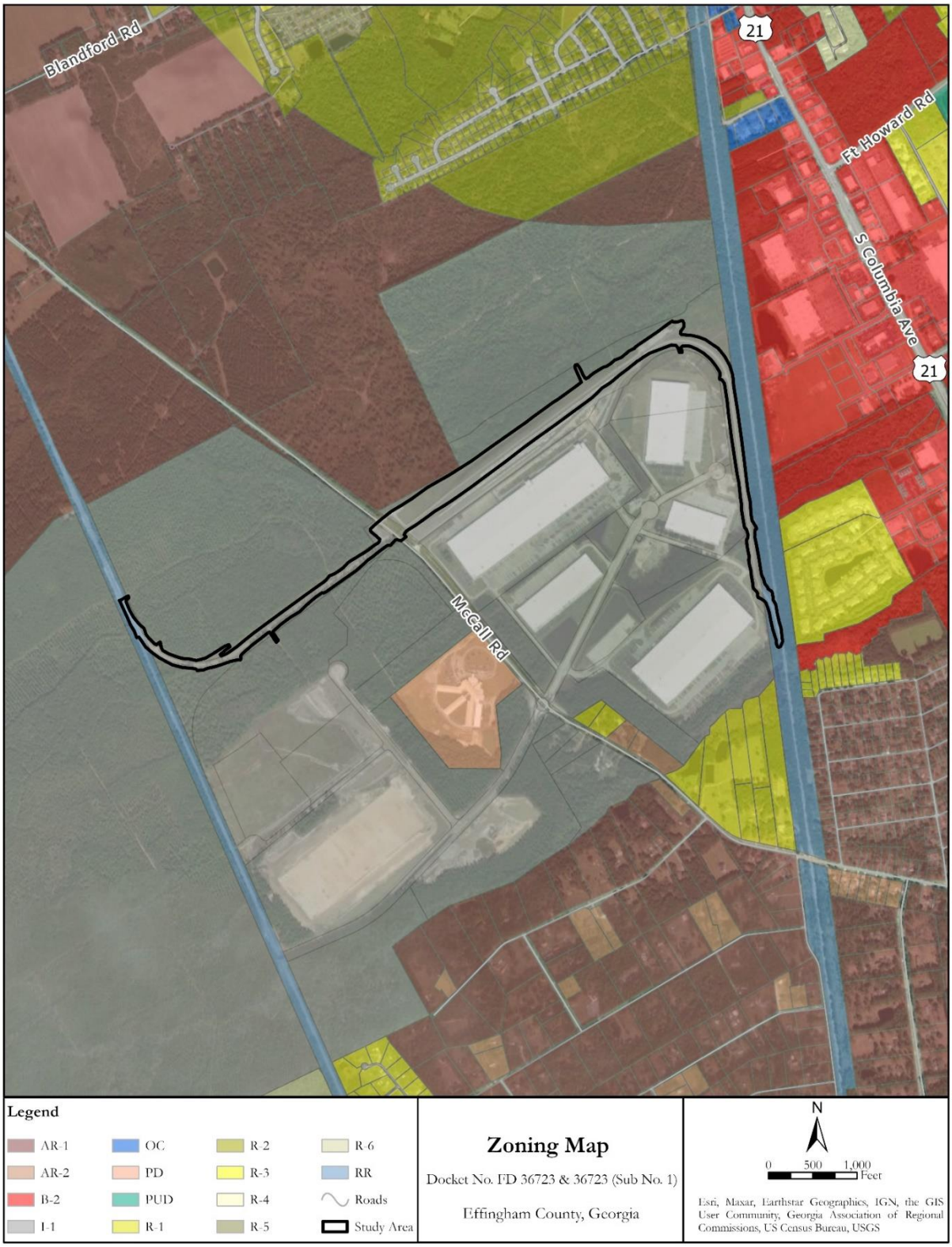


Figure 3-2 Nearest Residence, Park, and School

3.2.3 Environmental Consequences

Construction of the Line appears to have been consistent with Effingham County's land use, zoning, and local plans. The same is true for SIT's projected rail operations. Under the No-Action Alternative, there would be no SIT rail service, and the study area would continue to be zoned Light Industrial (I-1).

Construction

As noted above, zoning was changed from PD-R and PD to I-1 to accommodate the planned SGIH property. Therefore, construction of the Line did not alter existing zoning and land designation. Additionally, there were no residential or business displacements as a result of construction of the Line. While the construction resulted in the loss of vegetation and potential habitat, it appears to have been consistent with land use, zoning, and local plans, as the area is zoned for light industrial use.

Operations

The Proposed Action within the I-1 zoning district would continue to be consistent with local zoning. Furthermore, the Proposed Action would continue to promote Effingham County's Comprehensive Plan goals of expanding economic development by maintaining the railroad for local businesses. The surrounding land uses are not anticipated to change due to the Proposed Action.

No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the after-the-fact rail construction and operation. Without the requisite Board authority, rail service on the Line would cease, and no trains would operate on the Line. The land use of the study area would continue to be consistent with the zoning district (I-1).

3.2.4 Conclusion

As discussed above, OEA concludes that based on a review of land use and zoning in Effingham County and the City of Rincon, the Proposed Action would not result in impacts to zoning and land use. The Proposed Action is consistent with the comprehensive plan of Effingham County.

3.3 Energy

This section describes the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. The study area, data sources, and approach used to analyze potential impacts are described below. The Board's environmental regulations, 49 C.F.R. § 1105.7(e)(4), require an evaluation of potential impacts on transportation of energy resources, recyclable commodities, and the increase or decrease in energy efficiency.

3.3.1 Approach

OEA defined the study area for energy resources as the Line, within the greater SGIH boundary and Effingham County. OEA did not analyze energy effects from construction because the capacity to increase or decrease energy efficiency does not occur during construction. OEA also does not expect the Proposed Action to result in the transport of energy resources or recyclable

commodities by rail, nor does OEA expect the Proposed Action to cause any diversion of freight from rail to trucks, so that was also not evaluated in this Draft EA.

OEA evaluated the change in energy use due to rail operations. Energy consumption for continued operation of the Line includes diesel fuel for locomotives, fuel for personnel vehicles, and electricity for powering communications equipment and other rail-related equipment.

3.3.2 Affected Environment

The affected environment encompasses the Line and its rail operations. Two main electricity suppliers serve Effingham County: Georgia Power and Planters Electric Membership Cooperation. Based on a desktop review and site visit by OEA, there are no visible transmission lines on the SGIH property.

3.3.3 Environmental Consequences

Operations

Under the Proposed Action, continued operation of the Line would require diesel fuel for the locomotives. Additionally, during rail operations, vehicle and system-wide equipment directly related to moving commodities via rail would consume energy. The primary fuel source for rail operations is diesel fuel. One gallon of diesel fuel is equivalent to approximately 144,945,000 joules, a unit of energy (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023). The estimated changes in energy efficiency are measured in million joules (MJ). It is expected that the energy demand for communications and safety equipment would be negligible in comparison to the existing rail operations. Under the Proposed Action, energy usage would be approximately 2,824,864 MJ per year (approximately 19,402 gallons of diesel per year) due to the increase in locomotive usage from existing conditions. The consumption of diesel would increase by 2029 under the Proposed Action due to the anticipated increase in train traffic. However, the energy network should be able to accommodate this additional need.

Additionally, there would be an increase in fuel usage from vehicles idling at railroad crossings. Assuming most vehicles would be gasoline-fueled sedans, the estimated gasoline consumption per vehicle during idle would be 0.39 gallons of gasoline per hour (U.S. Department of Energy 2015). Under the Proposed Action, energy usage would be approximately 100,657 MJ per year (approximately 763 gallons of gasoline per year), per the total daily delay provided in **Section 3.1**.

No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action Alternative, operation of the Line would cease. However, the No-Action Alternative would cause diversions from rail to truck, increasing the need for energy consumption of diesel fuel for trucks. The estimated energy usage from rail-to-truck transportation would be approximately 5,591,230 MJ (approximately 38,402 gallons of diesel per year).

3.3.4 Conclusion

Because the energy network can accommodate the increases in fuel usage for the diesel locomotives, car idling, and increased truck usage for the Proposed Action, OEA concludes that the Proposed Action would result in negligible impacts to energy resources. Under the No-

Action Alternative, terminating the Line's operation would reduce electricity consumption but increase diesel fuel usage, as transportation shifts from rail to trucks. OEA concludes that this transition would result in negligible impacts to energy resources.

3.4 Air Quality

This section describes impacts on air quality that could have resulted from construction of the Line and the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. The study area, data sources, and approach used to estimate impacts to air quality from construction of the Line and its continued operation are described below.

3.4.1 Approach

OEA defined the study area for air quality as Effingham County. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) classifies each county in the U.S. as being in "attainment" or "nonattainment" for each criteria pollutant. A county is in attainment for a specific pollutant when the pollutant concentration is below the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). A county is in nonattainment for a specific pollutant when the pollutant concentration exceeds the NAAQS. Some nonattainment pollutants (such as ozone, CO, and PM_{10}) are further classified by the degree to which they exceed the NAAQS. For ozone, these classifications rank in severity in the order of "Marginal," "Moderate," "Serious," "Severe," and "Extreme." A county can be in attainment for some pollutants and in nonattainment for other pollutants. A third category, "maintenance area," is an area that was formerly in nonattainment but has reduced pollutant concentrations to be in attainment of the NAAQS. EPA bases its attainment status designations on ongoing air monitoring studies and the number of times specific criteria pollutants exceed NAAQS. EPA uses a fourth category, "unclassifiable," for areas with insufficient data to make an attainment determination. EPA treats unclassifiable areas like attainment areas. As discussed below in **Section 3.4.2**, the Effingham County region is in attainment for all criteria air pollutant NAAQS.

For actions necessitating a detailed air quality analysis, OEA assesses action-related emissions as the change to criteria air pollutants resulting from a Proposed Action. These changes are the difference between emissions under the Proposed Action compared to emissions under the No-Action Alternative. OEA quantitatively evaluates air emissions using EPA emission standards for locomotives (EPA 2009).[22] Due to the increase in gross ton miles annually of at least 100% as a result of the Proposed Action, the following detailed air quality analysis is presented.

In this Draft EA, OEA specifically estimated air pollutant emissions of oxides of nitrogen (NO_X) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs)—evaluated as precursor compounds for the formation of the criteria pollutant ozone (O_3), which is not directly emitted by combustion sources—and of criteria pollutants carbon monoxide (CO), sulfur dioxide (SO_2), and particulate matter (PM), including PM with a particle diameter less than or equal to 10 microns (PM_{10}) and PM with a particle diameter less than or equal to 2.5 microns ($PM_{2.5}$).

[22] Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). 2009. *Technical Highlight – Emission Factors for Locomotives*. Accessed: September 16, 2024. Available: https://nepis.epa.gov/exe/zypdf.cgi?Dockey=p100500b.pdf.

3.4.2 Affected Environment

Table 3-4 presents the attainment status of Effingham County, Georgia. As noted above in **Section 3.4.1** Effingham County is in attainment; therefore, EPA's conformity regulations would not apply to federal actions in the region. Moreover, the Board does not exercise continuing program control over rail operations and would not exercise such control over operation of the Proposed Action. Accordingly, the Proposed Action would not be subject to General Conformity.

Table 3-4 NAAQS, Effingham County, Georgia

Standard	Attainment Status
8-Hour Ozone (2015)	Attainment
PM2.5 (2012)	Attainment
PM10 (1987)	Attainment
Sulfur Dioxide (2010)	Attainment
Lead (2008)	Attainment
Carbon Monoxide (1971)	Attainment
Nitrogen Dioxide (1971)	Attainment

Source: NAAQS

3.4.3 Environmental Consequences

Construction of the Line likely resulted in negligible impacts to air quality, and operation of the Line would not result in adverse impacts to air quality. Under the No-Action Alternative, impacts to air quality would decrease.

Construction

Construction equipment, trucks, and workers' personal vehicles likely emitted diesel and gasoline exhaust, which contain various air pollutants, including CO, NO_X, and PM. Excavation and earthmoving activities, vehicle and equipment movement over unpaved roads and surfaces, and wind erosion of exposed soil and materials could have emitted fugitive PM, including small particles (PM_{10} and $PM_{2.5}$) that could have impacted air quality and human health. However, any emissions from construction activities would have been temporary and likely would have occurred only where construction took place or along roads traveled by construction vehicles. The exact effects of construction emissions on ambient air quality also would have been dependent on the construction schedule, the mobility of the emission sources, the types of equipment in use, and local meteorology at the time of construction.

Operation

Under the Proposed Action, operations are projected to increase by two trains per day, from two trains and four movements per day to a total of four trains and eight movements per day by 2029, the analysis year for this Draft EA. Based on information provided by SIL and SIT, OEA assumed an average train speed of 10 miles per hour on the 11,404-foot previously constructed rail line. SIT's switch operations use one 1,500 horsepower Tier 0 EMD GP9 locomotive.

SIT expects that new shippers could use SIT's freight services on the Line.[23] Annualized activity is expected to reach 20,000 railroad cars in 2029. Anticipated daily train activity is expected to be twice that of the existing conditions and would involve two switch crews handling an average of eight daily movements (four inbound and four outbound), five days per week. Based on 2024 inbound gross tonnage of 715,000 tons and outbound gross tonnage of 176,000 tons over 5,500 carloads, an assumed loaded railcar weight of 100-110 tons, and an assumed empty railcar weight of 28-33 tons, it is anticipated that the projected annual 2029 gross tonnage would be 2,345,000 tons inbound and 640,000 tons outbound under the Proposed Action.

Table 3-5 presents the estimated 2029 annual emissions associated with rail operations under existing conditions and the Proposed Action. As shown in **Table 3-5**, the incremental increase in criteria pollutant emissions would range from <0.1 tons per year for SO_2 to 2.8 tons per year for NO_X.

Table 3-5 Estimated Criteria Air Pollutant Annual Emissions

Scenario	Emissions (tons per year)					
	CO	**VOC**	**NO_X**	**PM_{10}**	**$PM_{2.5}$**	**SO_2**
Existing Conditions, 2024	0.1	0.1	0.8	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1
Proposed Action, 2029	0.4	0.2	2.8	0.1	0.1	<0.1

Source: CDM Smith

During rail operations, locomotives would emit exhaust, which would affect air quality. Increased rail activity under the Proposed Action would result in a slight increase in air pollutants, such as CO, VOC, and NO_X. Increased idling of vehicles due to train operations would also contribute to vehicle exhaust emissions. OEA estimated the increase in vehicle delays based on the estimated delays discussed in **Section 3.1 Transportation System and Safety**. Based on the estimated increases in delay, OEA concluded that increases in exhaust emissions from idling vehicles at at-grade crossings under the Proposed Action would be unlikely to exceed the NAAQS. Therefore, the Proposed Action would result in no adverse impacts on air quality. The continued operation of the Line would also reduce exhaust emissions from trucks.

No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action alternative, locomotive exhaust emissions would decrease because rail operations would cease. However, truck exhaust emissions would increase without a rail alternative to transport goods to and from the industrial park. Thus, OEA concludes that the No-Action alternative would likely result in impacts to air quality.

[23] On February 9, 2024, SIL and SIT filed a petition for clarification or other relief seeking Board authority to serve additional shippers including an aggregate transload facility operator (Conrad Yelvington), an unidentified transport company, and an unidentified logistics company during the pending construction and lease and operation proceedings, which the Board denied in a May 28, 2024 decision. In a more recent filing, SIT projected that the Line could serve three new shippers by 2029 including a steel coil receiver, a limestone terminal company, and an aggregate shipper (EI-33624, filed September 12, 2024).

3.4.4 Conclusion

During construction, equipment, trucks, and workers' personal vehicles likely emitted diesel and gasoline exhaust. Further, excavation and earthmoving activities likely emitted fugitive dust. However, any emissions from construction activities would have been temporary and have now concluded. Rail operations would result in increased emissions of criteria air pollutants. However, OEA anticipates that under the Proposed Action, the increase in emissions would not exceed the NAAQS. Therefore, OEA concludes the Proposed Action would have no adverse impacts to air quality. Under the No-Action alternative, there could be impacts to air quality from an anticipated increase in truck traffic.

3.5 Noise and Vibration

This section describes the impacts on noise that could have resulted from construction of the Line and potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. The study area, data sources, and approach used to estimate construction impacts and analyze the potential impacts of the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative are described below.

3.5.1 Approach

OEA used well-established methods to analyze noise and vibration impacts associated with the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative. See **Appendix C**, which details OEA's noise and vibration methodology and equations. OEA defined the study area for the noise and vibration analysis to be the area within approximately one-quarter mile to either side of the centerline of the Line. OEA determined that this study area distance, based on prior OEA experience, is sufficient to properly identify potential noise and vibration impacts from the Proposed Action. Regulations, statutes, and guidelines that specify requirements and provide guidance on the noise and vibration analysis and impact assessment for the Proposed Action include:

- The Board's environmental regulations at 49 C.F.R. §1105.7
- Noise Control Act of 1972 (42 United States Code [USC] 4910)
- National Environmental Policy Act (42 USC 4321-4370m-11)
- FRA Guidelines (Report Number 293630-1, December 1998)
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Occupational Noise Exposure; Hearing Conversation Amendment (Federal Register [FR] 48 (46), 9738—9785)
- EPA Railroad Noise Emission Standards (40 C.F.R. Part 201)

Day-night average noise level (DNL): The energy average of A-weighted decibels (dBA) sound level over a 24-hour period; includes a 10-decibel adjustment factor for noise between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. to account for the greater sensitivity of most people to noise during the night. The effect of nighttime adjustment is that one nighttime event, such as a train passing by between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., is equivalent to 10 similar events during the daytime.

A-weighted decibels (dBA): A measure of noise level used to compare noise from various sources.

A-weighting approximates the frequency response of human hearing.

- FRA Railroad Noise Emission Compliance Regulations (49 C.F.R. Part 210)
- FRA Final Rule on the Use of Locomotive Horns at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings (49 C.F.R. Parts 222 and 229)
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Transit Noise and Vibration Impact Assessment (FTA-VA-90-1003-06, May 2006)

Ambient noise: The sum of all noise (from human and naturally occurring sources) at a specific location over a specific time is called ambient noise.

The Board's environmental regulations for noise analysis (49 C.F.R. §1105.7e(6)) have the following criteria:

- An increase in noise exposure as measured by a day-night average noise level (DNL) of 3 A-weighted decibels (dBA) or more.
- An increase to a noise level of 65 DNL or greater.

If the estimated noise level increase at a location exceeds either of these above criteria, OEA estimates the number of affected receptors (e.g., schools, libraries, residences, retirement communities, nursing homes) and quantifies the noise increase. The two components (3 dBA increase or an increase to a noise level greater than 65 DNL) of the Board's criteria are implemented separately to determine an upper bound of the area of potential noise impact. However, noise research indicates that both criteria components must be met to cause an adverse noise impact (Coate, 1999[24], STB 1998b[25]).[26] That is, noise levels would have to be greater than or equal to 65 DNL and increase by 3 dBA or more for an adverse impact to noise to occur.

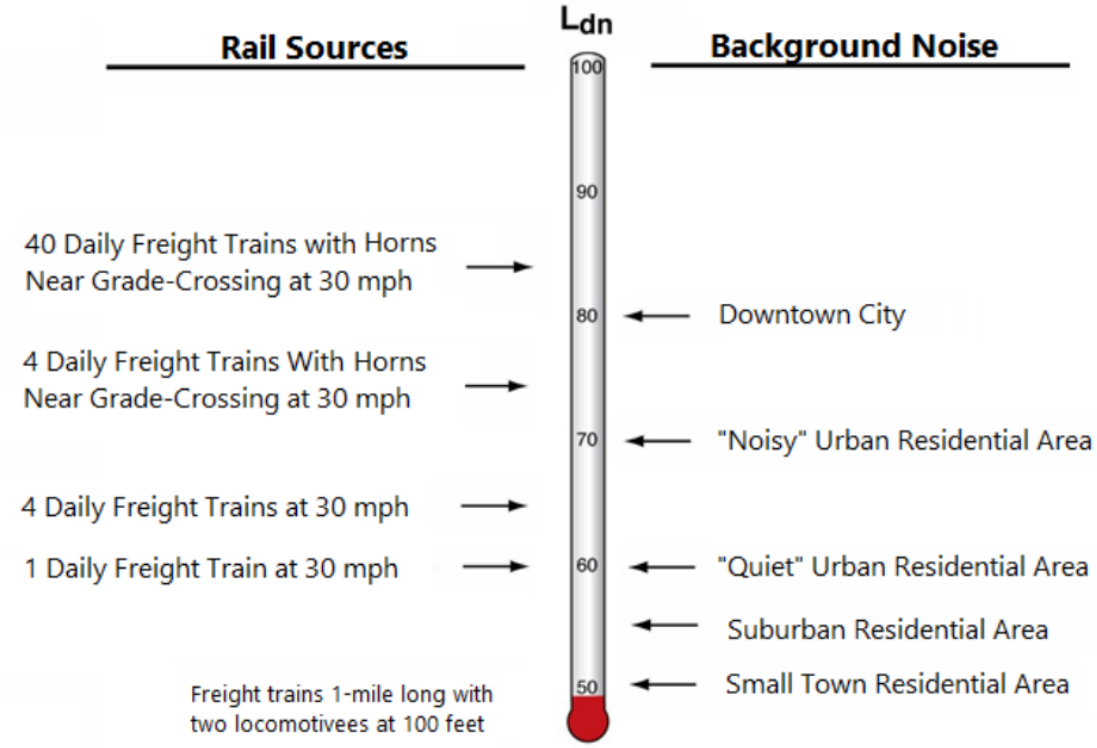
For this analysis, "Noise" is considered unwanted sound. Human perception of and response to a new noise source is based in part on how loud it is compared to existing/ambient noise levels. **Figure 3-3** presents the typical range of background DNL noise levels and typical noise DNL noise levels, generated by freight train activity at a distance of 100 feet from the tracks.

[24] Coate, D. 1999. Annoyance Due to Locomotive Warning Horns. Transportation Research Board Noise and Vibration Subcommittee A1FO4. August 1–4. San Diego, CA.

[25] Surface Transportation Board (Board). 1998a. Final Environmental Impact Statement No. 980194, Conrail Acquisition (Finance Docket No. 33388) by CSX Corporation and CSX Transportation, Inc., and Norfolk Southern Corporation and Norfolk Southern Railway Company (NS).

[26] Although the Board's regulations at 49 C.F.R. § 1105.7(e)(6) indicate that either an increase of 3 dBA or an increase to an DNL or Ldn of 65 dBA would be an adverse impact, research indicates that both of these conditions must be met or exceeded for an adverse noise impact from rail operations to occur.

Figure 3-3 Typical DNL (Ldn) Noise Levels



Source: Federal Transit Administration (FTA) 2018

3.5.2 Affected Environment

The study area for this analysis includes existing noise sources from the CSXT and NSR rail lines, the industrial development, vehicular traffic on McCall Road, and general human activity. The study area is located within the SGIH. Much of the area to the north and south of the rail line is undeveloped, forested land. The closest sensitive receptors to the study area include the Effingham Parc Apartments and Town Park Commons, two residential apartment complexes, located east of the CSXT line, and the Blanford Elementary School, which is located approximately 1,400 feet south of the project footprint. Because of this, the rail traffic is a dominant noise source in the study area. Existing noise levels are primarily within the "Quiet" range of residential categories.

Operations occur over the previously constructed track for a total of six days per week, typically occurring between 5:00 AM and 2:00 PM. Further details on existing train operations are provided in **Chapter 2**.

Using Computer Aided Noise Abatement (CadnaA), the leading environmental noise software application, OEA computed existing noise levels in the study area. OEA input site-specific data, such as existing roadway and rail alignments, into the model. OEA incorporated SIT's existing rail operations of approximately one round trip (one train, two train movements) five days per week to interchange with NSR and one round trip (one train, two train movements) five days per week to interchange with CSXT for a total of two trains per day, or two trains and four train movements total. Based on information provided by SIL and SIT, OEA assumed an average

speed of 10 miles per hour and an average train length of 720 feet, consisting of one locomotive and 10 freight cars. OEA modeled noise from the operation of locomotives and rail car wayside operations and horn noise on the Line during daytime hours. Currently, train horns are not used on the Line but were included in OEA's analysis to represent a worst-case scenario. The equations used to calculate noise levels are shown in **Appendix C**. OEA included estimated noise associated with the existing rail yard, such as noise from switch engines, car coupling, and other associated noise sources. Noise associated with CSXT and NSR and McCall Road were also incorporated into the noise model. OEA assumed that five freight trains with an average speed of 20 miles per hour occur on the CSXT and NSR lines per day. Amtrak's Palmetto line also currently uses the CSXT line. Therefore, OEA assumed that five Amtrak trains with an average speed of 49 miles per hour operate on the CSXT line. The speed limit at McCall Road is 45 miles per hour.

Figure 3-4 shows the results of the existing noise level modeling in the study area. The dark red contour lines are at 65.0 DNL. Based on this data, existing noise levels from the Line exceed 65 DNL at approximately 128 feet from the centerline of the Line when unaffected by other noise sources. No sensitive receptors are located within areas that exceed 65 DNL (the criteria set by 49 C.F.R. § 1105.7(e)(6) for adverse impacts). As the Blanford Elementary School is approximately 1,400 feet from the project footprint, the effects to the school from existing railroad noise are negligible. Noise levels near the Effingham Parc Apartments and Town Park Commons east of the project footprint are estimated to be 57.6 DNL at the closest location to the project footprint and are primarily caused by existing CSXT rail operations.

3.5.3 Environmental Consequences

Continued operation of the Line under the Proposed Action would increase the potential for noise impacts. However, due to the low number of additional trains per day and limited rail yard noise, operational noise impacts would not adversely affect sensitive receptors. The No-Action Alternative would remove rail-related sources of noise from the Line, which would result in decreased noise.

Construction

Construction of the Line likely resulted in construction-related noise impacts. However, OEA did not assess or model noise impacts resulting from construction of the Line because construction has already occurred. Moreover, any construction impacts that occurred were temporary. Accordingly, the analysis below analyzes only the noise impacts resulting from train operations.

Operations

Under the Proposed Action, the existing rail traffic on the Line would increase by two trains per day (to a total of 4 trains, eight movements per day) by OEA's 2029 forecast year. OEA used this projected traffic in its noise model for the Proposed Action. OEA assumed an average speed of 10 miles per hour and an average train length of 1,542 feet. OEA included estimated noise associated with the existing rail yard, which could be caused by switch engines, car coupling, or other associated noise sources. OEA assumed that operations associated with the NSR and CSXT rail lines and McCall Road would remain the same as under existing conditions.

Figure 3-4 Existing Noise Contour Levels in the Study Area

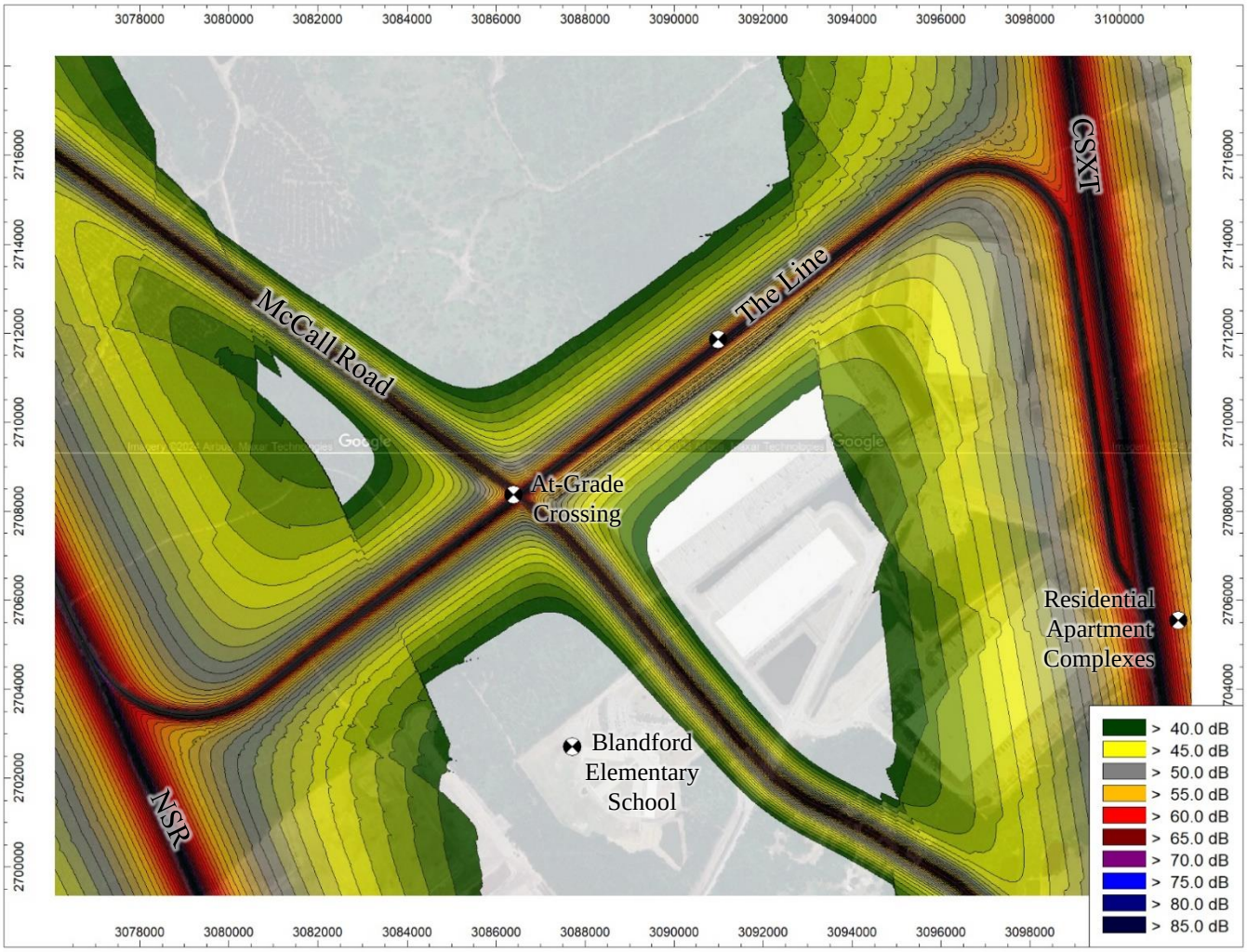
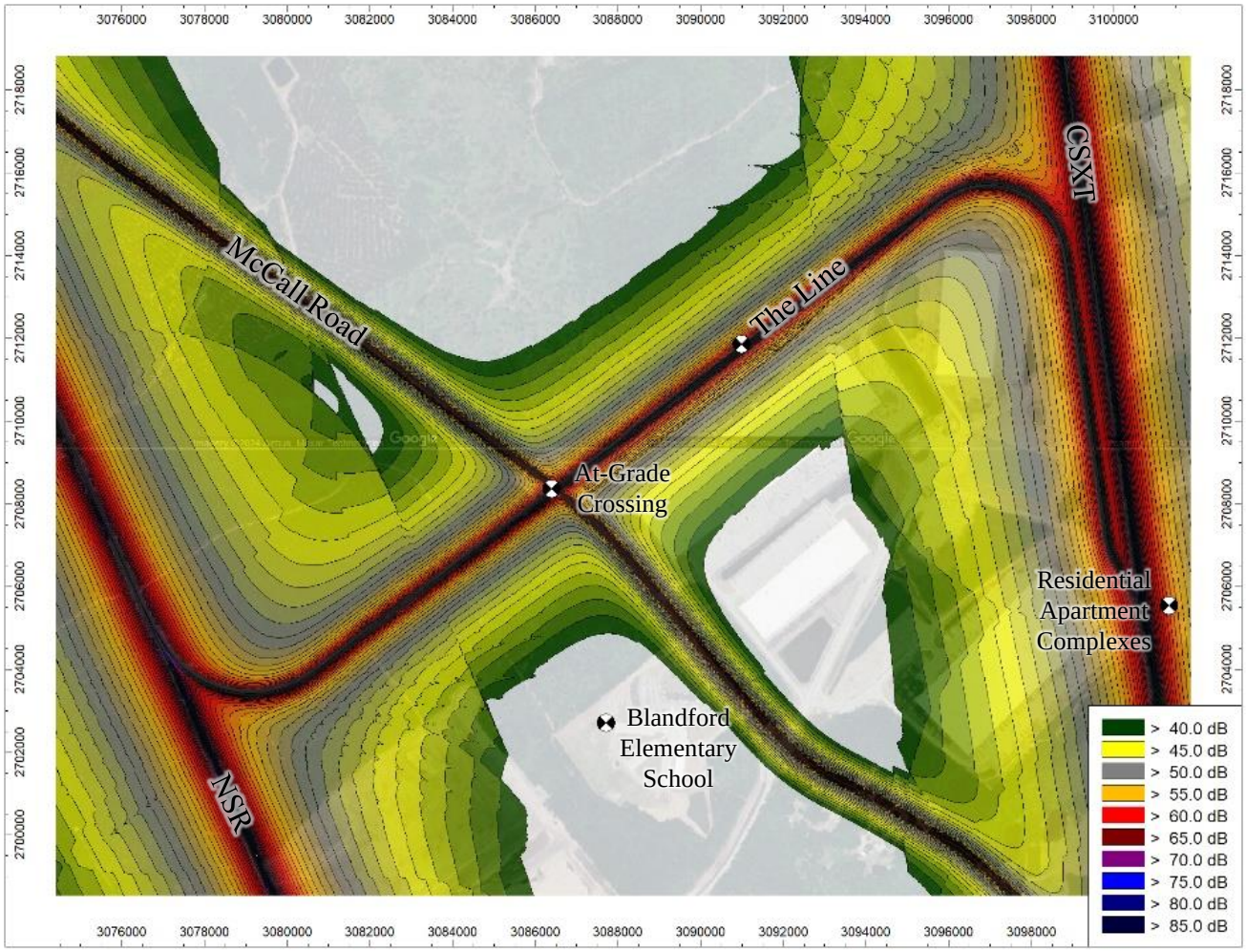


Figure 3-5 shows the results of the Proposed Action noise level modeling in the study area. The dark red contour lines are at 65 DNL (the criteria set by 49 C.F.R. § 1105.7(e)(6) for adverse impacts). Because of the low number of additional trains per day and limited rail yard noise, the 65 DNL contour is contained within the SGIH and does not include any sensitive receptors. Projected noise levels from the Line exceed 65 DNL at approximately 132 feet from the centerline of the Line when unaffected by other noise sources, only 4 feet further than under existing conditions.

Comparing the data from **Figure 3-4** to **Figure 3-5** shows that the 65 DNL noise contour from the Proposed Action is contained within the SGIH property and therefore would imperceptibly increase existing noise levels at the closest sensitive receptors (Effingham Parc Apartments and Town Park Commons) located to the east of the SIT and CSXT lines. Noise levels near the Effingham Parc Apartments and Town Park Commons would only increase by approximately 0.3 DNL at the closest location to the project footprint. Effects to Blandford Elementary School,

located 1,400-feet south of the project footprint, would be negligible as a result of the Proposed Action.

Figure 3-5 Proposed Action Contour Levels in the Study Area



Because the Proposed Action 65 DNL contours do not touch noise sensitive receptors (residences), and increases in existing noise levels are negligible, OEA does not anticipate adverse noise effects as a result of the Proposed Action.

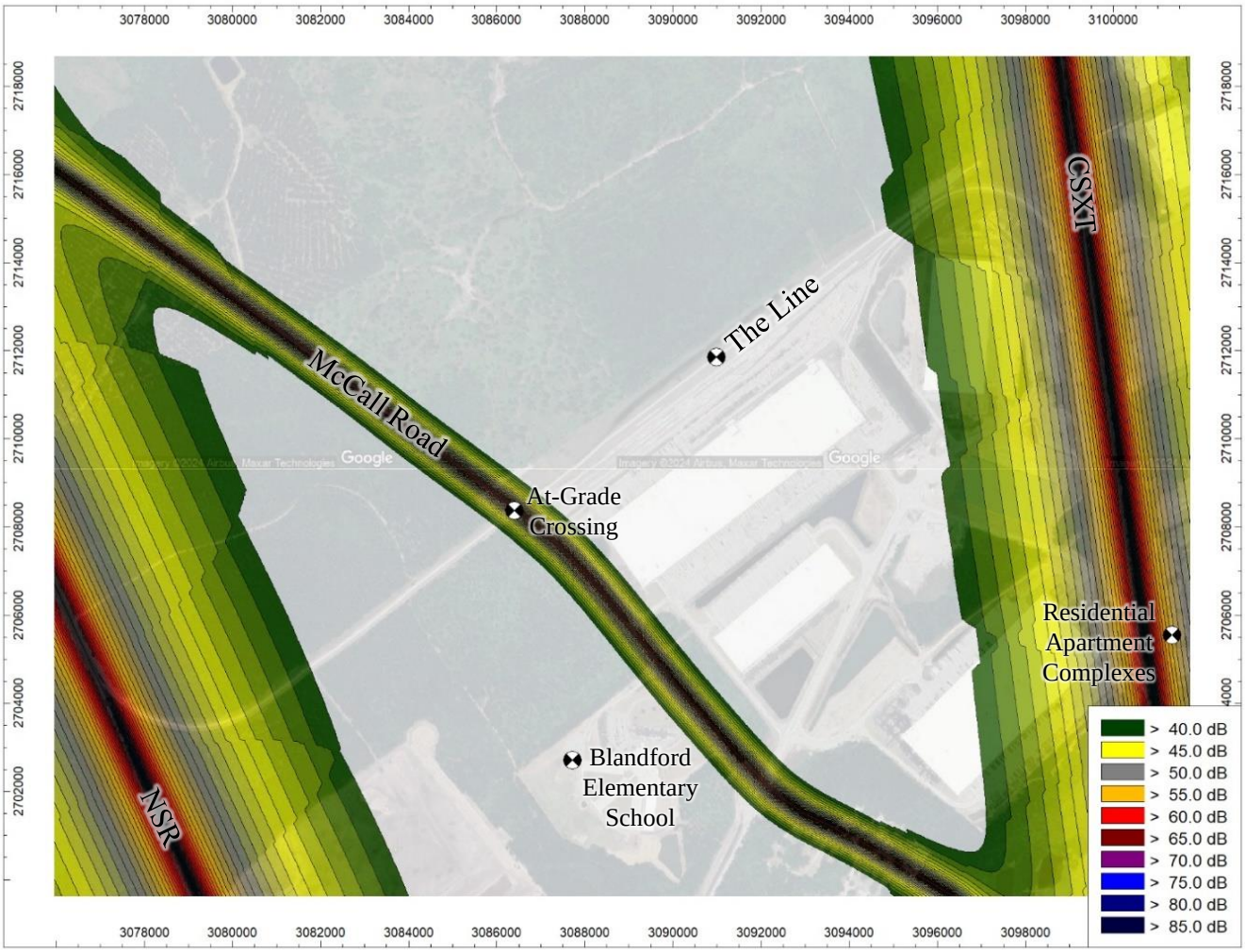
Vibration

OEA also examined the potential for vibration impacts under the Proposed Action. Train operation vibration levels, due to wheel/rail interaction, increase as a function of train speed. FTA guidance for assessing annoyance due to infrequent trains per day is 80 vibration decibels (VdB). Assuming that trains would travel 10 miles per hour, the 80 VdB vibration contour line would be 13 feet from the centerline of the Line. Sensitive receptors within the study area are much farther away than this distance, and therefore increased annoyance due to vibration from train passbys is not expected.

No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action Alternative, rail service would cease, and no trains would operate on the Line. This would remove rail-related sources of noise from the Line, which would result in decreased noise levels in the study area as compared to existing conditions. However, noise sources from the NSR and CSXT rail lines and McCall Road would remain unchanged. **Figure 3-6** shows the results of the No-Action noise level modeling near the study area.

Figure 3-6 No-Action Contour Levels around the Study Area



3.5.4 Conclusion

OEA concludes that based on modeling changes to noise and vibration levels from projected train operations on the Line, the Proposed Action would result in negligible impacts to noise and vibration. Under the No-Action Alternative, a decrease in noise and vibration would occur due to trains no longer operating on the Line.

3.6 Biological Resources

This section describes the impacts on biological resources that could have resulted from construction of the Line and the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. The study area, data sources, and approach used to analyze potential impacts are described below. The biological resources considered in this section include vegetation/plant communities, wildlife, and special status species. Special status species include species that are listed or proposed to be listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA; candidate species for ESA listing; sensitive species as listed by the state of Georgia; and migratory birds, including bald and golden eagles.

3.6.1 Approach

OEA defined the study area for biological resources as the project footprint, which includes the total area of disturbance (temporary and permanent) from construction of the Line (see **Section 2.2.1**). To determine the biological resources known to exist or expected to occur in the study area, OEA evaluated vegetation, wildlife habitat, threatened and endangered species, and natural areas. The evaluations included desktop reviews of aerial imagery and publicly available natural resource databases and maps, including USFWS Threatened and Endangered Species Active Critical Habitat Report GIS files, the USFWS Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) database, and Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) databases. OEA also reviewed prior environmental studies by Effingham County and SIL that were completed to obtain federal and county permits for the SGIH and construction of the Line.[27] In addition, OEA consulted with USFWS and Georgia state agencies.

3.6.2 Affected Environment

3.6.2.1 Vegetation/Plant Communities

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, OEA does not know the exact composition or area of the vegetation and plant communities in the study area prior to construction. However, prior to the development of the SGIH and construction of the Line, several habitat assessments were conducted from August to October 2011.[28] Four vegetative communities were documented within the SGIH during those studies:

1. Planted pine uplands,
2. Mixed pine/hardwood uplands,
3. Mixed pine/hardwood wetlands,
4. Maintained right-of-way.

Planted pine uplands range in age from early successional to mature merchantable timber. This community is located adjacent to the Line in the study area. These upland communities are dominated by loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*), slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*), long leaf pine (*Pinus*

[27] These environmental studies include Habitat Assessment for Threatened and Endangered Species, Effingham Industrial Development Authority/Research Forest Tract, Effingham County, Georgia; USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

[28] These habitat assessments include Habitat Assessment for Threatened and Endangered Species, Effingham Industrial Development Authority/Research Forest Tract, Effingham County, Georgia.

palustris), wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*), gallberry (*Ilex glabra*), privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*), dog fennel (*Eupatorium capillafolium*), broom-sedge (*Andropogon virinicus*), and bracken fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*), with a minor component of saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*).

Mixed pine/hardwood uplands are mostly located along the eastern section of the study area, adjacent to the CSXT line. These communities consist of loblolly pine, slash pine, longleaf pine, white oak (*Quercus alba*), sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), wax myrtle, gallberry, and bracken fern.

Mixed pine/hardwood wetlands are also located along the eastern section of the study area, adjacent to the CSXT line. These communities are in slightly lower elevations and in locations with poorly drained soils. Species within these communities include loblolly pine, red maple (*Acer rubrum*), swamp bay (*Persea palustris*), black tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*), wax myrtle, black willow (*Salix nigra*), possumhaw viburnum (*Viburnum nudum*), and soft rush (*Juncus effusus*).

Maintained right-of-way is characterized by grassed and early successional areas adjacent to the CSXT and NSR rail lines and McCall Road prior to construction. Construction of the Line resulted in a conversion from the above listed habitats to maintained right-of-way adjacent to the Line in the study area.

The SGIH was historically used for pine production on short harvest rotations and research associated with pine production. Prior to development of the SGIH, the property consisted of approximately 2,274 acres of forested upland habitat and 359 acres of forested wetland habitat in various age classes ranging from approximately 10 to 30 years old. The SGIH drains via Dasher Creek to the north, centrally from Willowpeg Creek, and via Sweigoffer Creek in the southern portion. All three tributaries flow northeast to the Savannah River via Mill Creek to Abercorn Creek.

Prior to January 2019, approximately 18.5 acres of the approximate 41-acre study area was cleared as part of the development of 161 acres of the SGIH in Area 1.[29] After construction of the Line, the study area consisted, and continues to consist, of mostly maintained right-of-way. Small areas of planted pine uplands, mixed pine/hardwood uplands, and mixed pine/hardwood wetlands remain along the edges of the study area.

3.6.2.2 Wildlife

Available wildlife habitat is limited to the four vegetative communities discussed above. After construction of the Line, common wildlife species that likely inhabited and are still likely to inhabit the study area include white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), bobcat (*Felis rufus*), gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*), eastern grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*), eastern rat snake (*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*), and a wide range of birds and insects.[30]

[29] Google Earth imagery dated January 25, 2019.

[30] Georgia Coastal Ecosystems Long Term Ecological Research Network, https://gce-lter.marsci.uga.edu/public/app/species_list.asp; USFWS Savannah National Wildlife Refuge, Species, https://www.fws.gov/refuge/savannah/species

3.6.2.3 Special Status Species

ESA-Listed Species

Section 7(a)(2) of the ESA requires federal agencies to ensure that any action they authorize, fund, or carry out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any listed species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. According to USFWS, critical habitat is defined as "the specific areas within a geographic area, occupied by the species at the time it was listed, that contain the physical or biological features that are essential to the conservation of endangered and threatened species and that may need special management or protection."

As previously noted in **Section 3.6.2.1**, prior to the development of the SGIH and construction of the Line, several habitat assessments were conducted within the SGIH from August to October 2011.[31] The assessments did not find any evidence of federally protected species within the study area. SIL was required to obtain a Nationwide Permit (NWP) from USACE for the permanent and temporary fill of jurisdictional wetlands (see **Section 3.7.3.1**) associated with construction of the Line; therefore, USACE consulted with USFWS regarding impacts to species listed under the ESA.[32] **Table 3-6** provides the species list generated by USACE as part of the NWP. See **Appendix E** for more detailed information on each species.

Table 3-6 IPaC Species List Generated by USACE Prior to Construction of the Line

Scientific Name	Common Name	Type	ESA Protection Status
Dryobates borealis	Red-cockaded woodpecker	Bird	T
Ambystoma cingulatum	Frosted flatwoods salamander	Amphibian	T
Drymarchon couperi	Eastern indigo snake	Reptile	T
Lindera melissifolia	Pondberry	Flowering Plant	E

E = Endangered, T = Threatened

To identify any federally listed threatened and endangered species potentially present in the study area, OEA obtained an Official Species List from the USFWS IPaC database on August 27, 2024, and an updated list on March 11, 2025 (see in **Appendix A**).

According to the Official Species List, four threatened, endangered, or proposed threatened or endangered species may be present in the study area (see **Table 3-7**). No designated critical habitat is present in the study area. See **Appendix E** for more detailed information on these species.

[31] Habitat Assessment for Threatened and Endangered Species, Effingham Industrial Development Authority/Research Forest Tract, Effingham County, Georgia.

[32] SIL obtained their NWP via Savannah Industrial Development, LLC, another holding of OmniTRAX; USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

Table 3-7 Current IPaC Species List Generated by OEA on March 11, 2025

Scientific Name	Common Name	Group	ESA Protection Status
Perimyotis subflavus	Tricolored bat	Mammal	PE
Drymarchon couperi	Eastern indigo snake	Reptile	T
Danaus plexippus	Monarch butterfly	Insect	PT
Lindera melissifolia	Pondberry	Flowering Plant	E

E = Endangered, T = Threatened, PE = Proposed Endangered, PT = Proposed Threatened

State Protected Species

For species listed by the State of Georgia as rare, unusual, or threatened and endangered under the Endangered Wildlife Act, the state's jurisdiction is limited to the capture, killing, or selling of protected species, and protection of suitable habitat of protected species on public land. Georgia DNR is charged with administering the rules and regulations of the Endangered Wildlife Act.

During preliminary consultation regarding the Proposed Action, DNR stated that there were no known occurrences of state protected species or species of concern in the Study Area (see **Appendix A**). To determine which State-listed threatened and endangered species could potentially be present in the study area, OEA obtained a list of state protected species known to occur within or near the SGIH from the DNR Georgia Biodiversity Portal database on August 27, 2024 (see **Appendix E**). According to the DNR database, four threatened, rare, or unusual species are known to occur or have historically occurred in or near the SGIH (see **Table 3-8**). Several of the species listed as potentially occurring in or near the SGIH are not anticipated to occur within the study area due to habitat requirements and distribution. The only species known to occupy habitats similar to those habitats found in the study area is the gopher tortoise.

Table 3-8 List of State Threatened, Rare or Unusual Species in the Vicinity of the SGIH[33]

Scientific Name	Common Name	Group	GA Protection Status	Habitat Summary
Elanoides forticatus	Swallow-tailed kite	Bird	R	River swamps; marshes, open pine and bottomland forest with super canopy pines.
Heterodon simus	Southern hognose snake	Reptile	R	Sandhills; fallow fields; longleaf pine-turkey oak
Sarracenia minor var. *minor*	Hooded pitcherplant	Flowering Plant	U	Wet savannas, pitcherplant bogs

[33] Rare Georgia State Protected by Quarter Quad (https://georgiabiodiversity.org/portal/element_unit_map/qq/ga_protected). Quarter quads: Rincon, GA-SC, SW; Springfield, GA, SE; Meldrim, GA, NE.

Scientific Name	Common Name	Group	GA Protection Status	Habitat Summary
Gopherus polyphemus	Gopher tortoise	Reptile	T	Sandhills; dry hammocks; longleaf pine-turkey oak woods; old fields

T = Threatened, R = Rare, U = Unusual (and thus deserving of special consideration).

Gopher tortoise – as discussed above in **Section 3.6.2.3**, the study area may have contained suitable habitat for the gopher tortoise prior to construction of the Line. The gopher tortoise typically occurs in well-drained, sandy soils in relatively open grassy areas with a sparse pine overstory. Gopher tortoises dig burrows in dry places such as sandhills, flatwoods, prairies and coastal dunes or in human-made environments such as pastures, grassy roadsides and old fields. For the gopher tortoise to thrive, the animal generally needs three things: well-drained sandy soil (for digging burrows), plenty of low plant growth (for food), and open, sunny areas (for nesting and basking). According to the field survey results of studies conducted by Effingham County in 2011, only a very small portion of the study area may have contained suitable habitat for the species, and no gopher tortoise burrows were observed during field surveys.[34] No suitable habitat for the gopher tortoise is currently present in the study area.

3.6.2.4 Migratory Birds and Eagles

The MBTA and the BGEPA are administered by USFWS to protect native birds. Any activity, intentional or unintentional, resulting in take (including killing, capturing, selling, trading, and transport) of migratory birds, including eagles, is prohibited unless otherwise permitted by the USFWS (50 C.F.R. Sec. 10.12 and 16 U.S.C. Sec. 668(a)). The MBTA has no provision for allowing take of migratory birds that may be unintentionally killed or injured by otherwise lawful activities. Actions must be taken to avoid or minimize impacts to migratory birds and to prevent or abate the detrimental alteration of the environment for the benefit of migratory birds, as practicable.

Based on the results of studies completed by Effingham County in 2011, and a review of recent aerial imagery, there is no suitable habitat for bald or golden eagles, and no eagles were observed in the study area.[35] However, the MTBA extends protections to more than 1,000 species of birds in the United States. .Migratory bird species documented in the USFWS IPaC[36] species list with the highest probability of presence in the study area based on species habitat requirements include brown-headed nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*), chimney swift (*Chaetura pelagica*), Chuck-will's-widow (A*ntrostomus carolinensis*), Eastern whip-poor-will (A*ntrostomus vociferus*), painted bunting (*Passerina ciris*), prairie warbler (*Setophaga discolor*), prothonotary warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*), red-headed woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*). See **Appendix E, Table 1** for more detailed information on these species. The study area does not contain any documented breeding or nesting grounds of significance for migratory birds, but suitable habitat

[34] Habitat Assessment for Threatened and Endangered Species, Effingham Industrial Development Authority/Research Forest Tract, Effingham County, Georgia.

[35] Id.; Google Earth imagery dated January 25, 2019.

[36] USFWS IPaC Report, Project Code: 2024-0096725. March 11, 2025.

for migratory birds was present prior to construction of the Line and remains present in the study area.

3.6.3 Environmental Consequences

3.6.3.1 Vegetation/Plant Communities

Construction

Construction of the Line required the removal of vegetation and plant communities and resulted in permanent loss of planted pine uplands, mixed pine/hardwood uplands, and mixed pine/hardwood wetlands communities in the project footprint. As noted above, these communities were converted to maintained right-of-way. But impacts to vegetation and plant communities did not result in significant changes to the landscape or ecological values of the adjacent vegetative communities. Further, impacts were localized to the vicinity of the Line and were minor in the context of the surrounding landscape.

Operations

Rail operations would not alter or have any effects on the existing vegetative communities present in the study area beyond what was altered or effected during construction of the Line. Maintenance activities would include vegetation clearing, trimming, and/or treatment with herbicide in the right-of-way of the Line. These activities would be infrequent and brief, localized to the vicinity of the Line, and would have no impacts to the vegetative communities in the study area.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to vegetation and plant communities beyond impacts resulting from the prior construction of the Line. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, there would be no potential impacts to vegetation and plant communities from maintenance activities under the No-Action alternative.

3.6.3.2 Wildlife

Construction

Construction of the Line required the removal of vegetation and resulted in a permanent loss of forested habitat for wildlife in the study area. The species that may have inhabited the study area prior to construction are mobile, would have been able to relocate to suitable habitat nearby, and are highly adaptable to habitat disturbance. Although forested habitat was lost, the total area lost was negligible in the context of the home ranges of wildlife expected in the project footprint. Furthermore, the maintained right-of-way and stormwater pond associated with the Line would have provided suitable feeding and foraging habitat for species discussed above. Therefore, OEA determined that any impacts to wildlife resulting from construction of the Line were likely negligible.

Operations

The Proposed Action could result in wildlife mortality or injury from operation-related collisions or crushing. Collisions or crushing would be more likely to affect smaller, less mobile species (such as insects and reptiles) that are not able to move away quickly from moving equipment, trains, and other vehicles. Collisions with larger animals and birds would be less likely because those animals could move more quickly and vacate the rail right-of-way. OEA expects that wildlife fatalities and injuries from maintenance vehicles and trains would be infrequent because trains operating on the Line typically move at slow speeds (maximum speed is 10 mph), which would allow most species to avoid collision or crushing. During rail operations, OEA expects that wildlife fatalities and injuries from trains could occur but would be infrequent and would result in negligible impacts to wildlife populations. Therefore, OEA anticipates that there would be negligible impacts to wildlife associated with rail operations.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to wildlife beyond impacts resulting from the prior construction of the Line. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, there would be a decrease in potential impacts on wildlife from operation-related collisions or crushing or maintenance activities under the No-Action Alternative.

3.6.3.3 Special Status Species

ESA-Listed Species

The most recent IPaC species list did not identify red-cockaded woodpecker and frosted flatwood salamander as species that may be present in the project area. Therefore, OEA is only analyzing potential impacts to these species from construction under the Proposed Action. Moreover, the tricolored bat and monarch butterfly were not proposed to be listed under the ESA until after construction of the Line was completed. Therefore, OEA is only analyzing impacts to these species from rail operations under the Proposed Action and the No-Action Alternative.

During preliminary consultation, USFWS notified OEA that there were no anticipated impacts to ESA protected species in the study area (see **Appendices A and E**).

Construction

Because SIL was required to obtain a NWP from USACE for the permanent and temporary fill of jurisdictional wetlands associated with construction of the Line, USACE consulted with USFWS regarding impacts to species listed under the ESA. [37] As the Line has already been constructed, OEA is using USACE's previous effect determinations for its analysis of the impacts that could have resulted from construction of the Line.

Red-cockaded woodpecker – Based on aerial imagery at the time and information in the habitat assessment, the mature pine forest in the study area did not have an open understory, with few or

[37] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

no midstory or canopy hardwood trees.[38] Per the Effects Determination Guidance for Endangered & Threatened Species (EDGES), USACE determined that construction of the Line may have affected but was not likely to adversely affect the red cockaded woodpecker.[39]

Frosted flatwood salamander – USACE determined that construction of the Line would not impact long-leaf pine-flatwoods or slash pine flatwoods. Therefore, per EDGES, USACE determined that construction of the Line would not have affected the frosted flatwood salamander.[40]

Eastern indigo snake – Prior to construction of the Line, USACE concluded that the site contained moderately suitable soils for the gopher tortoise.[41] According to surveys conducted in the area, no gopher tortoises or gopher tortoise burrows were observed in the SGIH, but it is possible the eastern indigo snake could have still used wetlands in the study area during summer months.[42] There were no confirmed sightings of the eastern indigo snake within or in the vicinity of the SGIH prior to construction.[43] Per EDGES, USACE determined that construction of the Line may have affected but was not likely to adversely affect the eastern indigo snake. [44]

Pondberry – Prior to construction, USACE determined that construction of the Line would not affect pondberry.[45]

Based on the information available at the time, USACE determined that construction of the Line may have affected but was not likely to adversely affect the red-cockaded woodpecker and the eastern indigo snake. USACE also determined that construction of the Line would have no effect on the frosted flatwoods salamander and pondberry due to the lack of suitable habitat. No species-specific mitigation was included in the NWP permit.

[38] Id.

[39] USACE' Savannah District and the USFWS' Georgia Ecological Service office jointly developed EDGES to improve coordination on projects that may affect species listed under the ESA.

[40] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

[41] As discussed above in **Section 3.6.2.3 Special Status Species**, eastern indigo snake in Georgia is closely associated with the gopher tortoise, a reptile that excavates extensive underground burrows, which provide the snake shelter from winter cold and protection from dehydration in the summer heat.

[42] Habitat Assessment for Threatened and Endangered Species, Effingham Industrial Development Authority/Research Forest Tract, Effingham County, Georgia.

[43] Id.; Rare Georgia State Protected by Quarter Quad (https://georgiabiodiversity.org/portal/element_unit_map/qq/ga_protected). Quarter quads: Rincon, GA-SC, SW; Springfield, GA, SE; Meldrim, GA, NE.

[44] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

[45] Id.

Operations

Potential impacts could occur during rail operations to ESA-listed species or species proposed to be ESA-listed. Maintenance activities would include vegetation maintenance in the right-of-way such as vegetation clearing, trimming, or treatment with herbicide.

Eastern indigo snake and *pondberry* – operations would have no effect on the eastern indigo snake and pondberry due to the lack of suitable habitat in the study area.

Tricolored bat – rail operations would not impact the ability of the tricolored bat to feed, forage, or breed in the study area because rail operations occur during the day when bats are roosting. Maintenance activities would include vegetation clearing, trimming, or treatment with herbicide in the right-of-way, but these activities would not be expected to impact tricolored bats because no roosting trees would be removed. OEA determined that rail operations would have no effect on tricolored bat based on the USFWS IPaC Determination Key for the species (see **Appendix E**). Thus, OEA concludes that rail operations would not impact the continued existence of the species.

Monarch butterfly – the study area contains potentially suitable habitat for the monarch butterfly in the right-of-way. Rail operations and maintenance vehicles are not expected to impact the monarch butterfly because trains do not exceed 10 mph. Maintenance vehicles also typically travel at slow speeds on the access road because it is an unpaved road that is not part of the public road network. Maintenance activities could include vegetation clearing, trimming, and/or treatment with herbicide in the right-of-way. While some flowering plants could be removed through these activities, impacts would be negligible due to the limited area that would be treated with herbicide. Therefore, OEA concludes that continued rail operations would not impact the continued existence of the species.

No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, no further impacts to ESA listed species or species proposed for ESA-listing would occur beyond impacts resulting from the prior construction of the Line.

State Protected Species

Construction

Construction of the Line may have affected state protected species. Suitable habitat for gopher tortoise may have been present prior to construction. As noted in **Section 3.6.2.3**, only a small portion of the study area contained suitable habitat for gopher tortoise. However, no burrows were found during the field surveys conducted by Effingham County. Therefore, construction of the Line likely had no effect on gopher tortoise.

Operations

Rail operations would have no effect on gopher tortoise, due to the current lack of suitable habitat in the study area. As noted in **Section 3.2.6.3**, DNR notified OEA that there were no known occurrences of state protected species or species of concern in the study area during

preliminary consultation. Therefore, OEA determined that rail operations would have no effect on these species.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to State protected species beyond what has already occurred during construction of the Line. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease.

3.6.3.4 Migratory Birds and Eagles

Construction

Construction of the Line resulted in removal of vegetation that likely provided habitat for migratory birds in the study area. As noted in **Section 3.6.2.4**, the study area did not contain any known nesting or breeding areas of significance for migratory bird species prior to construction of the Line. Migratory bird species that were expected to occur in the study area prior to construction (see Appendix E, **Table 1**) were mobile, and it is reasonable to assume they would have been able to relocate to nearby suitable habitat during construction of the Line. Although forested habitat was lost, the total area lost was negligible in the context of the home ranges of wildlife expected in the project footprint. Furthermore, the maintained right-of-way and stormwater pond associated with the Line would have provided suitable habitat for the migratory bird species previously discussed in **Section 3.6.2.4**. Therefore, impacts to migratory birds associated with construction of the Line were determined to be negligible.

Construction of the Line had no effect on bald and golden eagles because no suitable habitat was present in the study area prior to construction.

Operations

Operation of trains and maintenance vehicles are expected to have negligible effects on migratory birds. Minimal clearing or alteration to vegetation providing habitat for migratory birds would occur as part of rail operations. Migratory birds expected to occur in the study area are mobile and able to relocate to suitable habitat nearby. Therefore, the Proposed Action would have a negligible effect on migratory birds.

Operations would have no effect on bald and golden eagles because there is no suitable habitat for the species present in the study area.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to migratory birds beyond what has already been described in the construction section above. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, there would be no potential impacts on migratory birds from maintenance activities associated with rail operations under the no-action alternative.

3.6.4 Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, OEA concludes that the Proposed Action would result in minor impacts to biological resources due to the permanent loss of vegetation communities and the 'may affect, not likely to adversely affect' determination for special status species.

Construction of the Line required the removal and permanent loss of vegetation and plant communities in the project footprint but impacts to vegetation and plant communities did not result in significant changes to the landscape or ecological values of the adjacent vegetative communities. Rail operations would not result in impacts beyond what was required for construction of the Line. Therefore, OEA has determined the Proposed Action would have minor impacts to vegetation.

Construction of the Line may have temporarily displaced common wildlife and migratory bird species in the project footprint. The species that may have inhabited the area prior to construction are mobile, would have been able to relocate to suitable habitat nearby, and are highly adaptable to habitat disturbance. Although forested habitat was lost, the maintained right-of-way and stormwater pond associated with the Line would have provided suitable feeding and foraging habitat for species discussed above. During rail operations, OEA expects that wildlife fatalities and injuries from trains could occur but would be infrequent and would result in negligible impacts to wildlife populations. Therefore, OEA determined that the Proposed Action would have negligible impacts to wildlife and migratory birds.

Construction of the Line may have had an impact on special status species. Based on the information available at the time, USACE determined that construction of the Line may have affected but was not likely to adversely affect the red-cockaded woodpecker and the eastern indigo snake. Operations of the Line were determined to have no effect on special status species due to lack of suitable habitat. Due to the 'may affect, not likely to adversely affect' determination for the red-cockaded woodpecker and eastern indigo snake, OEA has determined the Proposed Action would have had minor impacts to special status species.

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to biological resources beyond what has already been described in the construction sections above. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, there would be a decrease in potential impacts to biological resources from maintenance activities and potential collisions associated with rail operations under the No-Action Alternative.

3.7 Water Resources

This section describes the impacts on water resources that resulted from construction of the Line and the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. The study area, data sources, and approach used to analyze potential impacts to water resources are described below. Water resources considered in this section include groundwater, surface waters (streams), wetlands, floodplains, water quality, and coastal zone management.

3.7.1 Approach

OEA defined the study area for surface waters, wetlands, and floodplains as the project footprint which includes the total area of disturbance (temporary and permanent) from construction of the

Line (see **Section 2.2.1**). The study area for groundwater is defined as the three aquifers beneath the Coastal Georgia region (surficial aquifer, Brunswick aquifer, and the Floridan aquifer). The study area for coastal zone management is defined as Effingham County.

3.7.2 Affected Environment

3.7.2.1 Surface Waters (Streams) and Wetlands

USACE and state environmental departments administer Section 404 and 401 of the Clean Water Act (CWA), 33 U.S.C. §§ 1251-1389, which regulates the discharges of fill into waters of the United States (WOTUS), including wetlands. Wetlands are defined at 33 C.F.R. § 328.3(c)(1) as "those areas that are inundated or saturated by surface water or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soils." OEA used wetland delineations provided by SIL and SIT, previously approved USACE permits, USFWS National Wetlands Inventory (NWI), and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Hydrography Dataset to identify and characterize waterways and hydrology within the study area. The study area includes three wetland areas, which are classified as freshwater forested wetlands.

3.7.2.2 Floodplains

Floodplains are defined as any land area susceptible to being inundated by waters from any source (44 C.F.R. § 59.1) and are often associated with surface waters and wetlands. Floodplains are valued for their contribution to natural flood and erosion control, biological productivity, and ecological benefits and functions. Floodplains can also be considered a hazard area because buildings, structures, and properties located in floodplains can be inundated and damaged during floods.

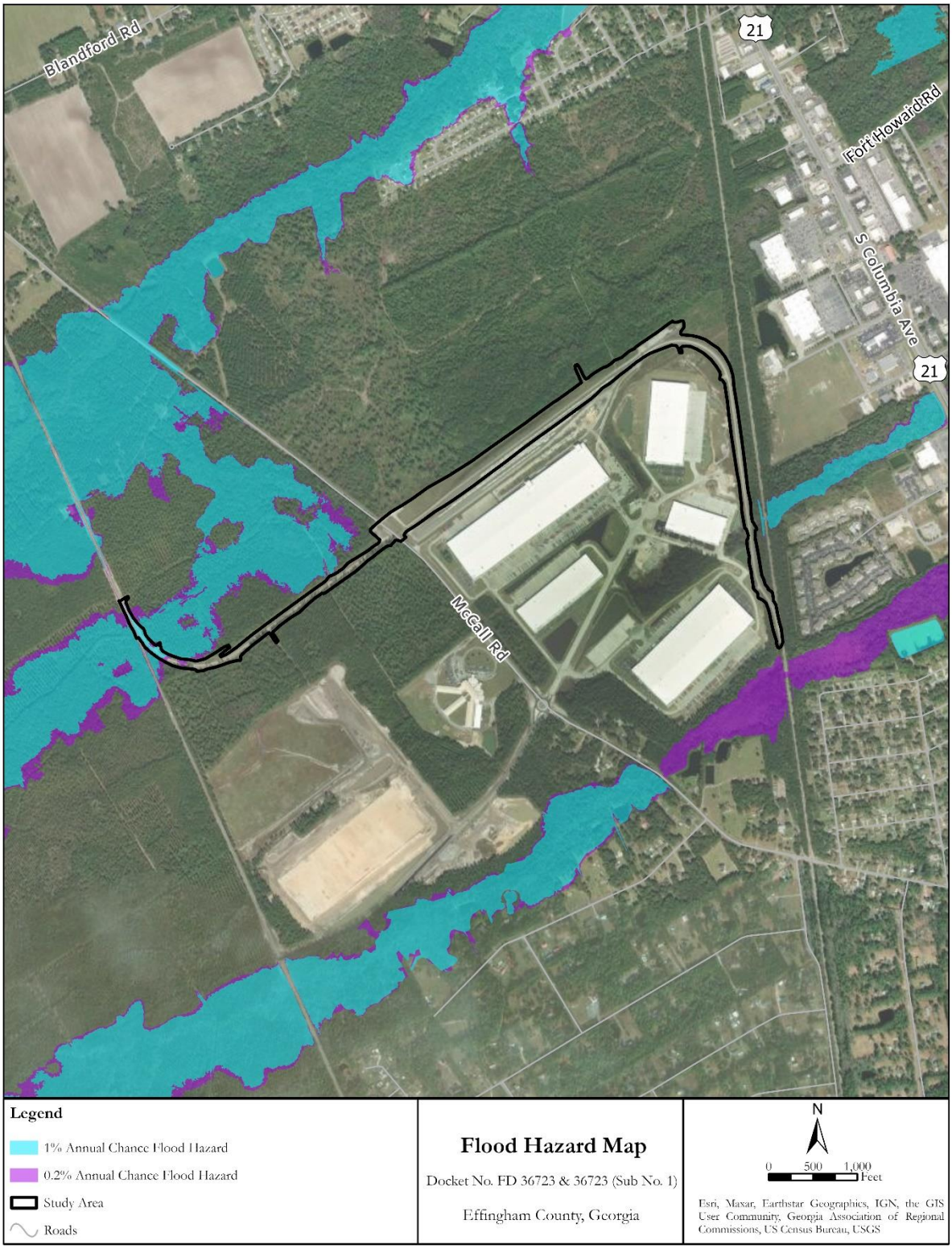
According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Flood Hazard Layer, one 100-year floodplain (1% annual chance of base flood) was identified in the study area (see **Figure 3-7**) near the connection to the NSR line. There is also a 100-year floodplain located near the connection to the CSXT line; however, this floodplain is located outside the study area.

3.7.2.3 Groundwater

The three aquifers beneath the Coastal Georgia region are the surficial aquifer, Brunswick aquifer, and the Floridan aquifer. The thickness of the surficial aquifer is typically less than 50 feet and consists mostly of beds of unconsolidated sand and shell. The Brunswick aquifer is located between the surficial and Floridan aquifers. The thickness of this aquifer ranges from 200 feet to less than 100 feet. Within the Coastal Georgia region, the Brunswick aquifer is commonly used as an alternate water source to the Floridan aquifer. Nearly all groundwater supplied in the region is from the Floridan aquifer system. The Floridan aquifer is primarily comprised of limestone, dolostone, and calcareous sand.[46]

[46] USGS – Groundwater Conditions of Georgia, https://ga.water.usgs.gov/infodata/gwconditions/#:~:text=Groundwater%20Conditions%20of%20Georgia

Figure 3-7 FEMA Flood Hazards



3.7.2.4 Coastal Zone Management

The Georgia DNR Coastal Resources Division administers the Georgia Coastal Management Program (GCMP), as outlined in the federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) of 1972.[47] The GCMP addresses the economic development concerns and natural resources in eleven coastal counties in Georgia, including Effingham County. Within these counties, all waters including the coastal ocean and all submerged lands are considered part of the coastal area.

3.7.3 Environmental Consequences

As discussed below, construction of the Line resulted in impacts to surface waters and wetlands and floodplains. Operation of the Line could result in additional impacts to water resources including surface waters and wetlands, floodplains, and water quality.

3.7.3.1 Surface Waters (Streams) and Wetlands

Construction

Construction of the Line resulted in permanent and temporary fill of wetlands. According to USACE (Permit File No. SAS-2003-20390), construction of the Line impacted a total of 0.66 acres of jurisdictional wetlands as shown in **Table 3-10** below. Impacts associated with construction of the Line were addressed through two separate NWP authorizations from USACE. The first NWP (January 2020 Permit)[48] authorized a total of 2.5 acres of permanent impacts to wetlands to construct an access road (Gateway Parkway) and railroad crossing associated with development of the SGIH. Of those 2.5 acres of authorized impacts, only 0.49 acres of permanent fill (Wetland Impact Area I) in wetlands were associated with construction of the

Line. The second NWP (July 2020 Permit)[49] authorized a total of 0.17 acres of impacts to wetlands for the connection between the CSXT line and the SGIH. The stabilization of a culvert outfall located in the CSXT right-of-way required placement of rip rap (rock), which resulted in 0.02 acres of permanent fill in wetlands and 0.03 acres of temporary fill in wetlands to provide access for the work area (Wetland Impact Area L). Construction of the Line between the CSXT right-of-way and the SGIH, the maintenance access road, and a ballast walkway resulted in 0.07 acres of permanent fill and 0.05 acres of temporary fill in wetlands (Wetland Impact Area M).

Table 3-9 Wetlands Impacted from Construction of the Line

Wetland Impact Area	Permanent Impact (Acres)	Temporary Impact (Acres)
I	0.49	0.0
L*	0.02	0.03
M*	0.07	0.05

[47] Georgia Department of Natural Resources – Coastal Resources Division, Georgia Coastal Management Program, https://coastalgadnr.org/CoastalManagement.

[48] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Nationwide 14 Approval Letter, January 2, 2020.

[49] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

*Located within the CSXT right-of-way.

Because the loss of jurisdictional wetlands associated with the two NWP authorizations was greater than 0.10 acres, USACE required compensatory mitigation to offset the unavoidable impacts to wetlands. Purchase of compensatory mitigation credits from an approved mitigation bank was required before any permitted work was allowed to begin. Savannah Industrial Development, LLC (SID)[50] purchased compensatory mitigation credits for both NWP authorizations from the AA Shaw Wetland Mitigation Bank. Verification of the credits' purchase is documented in the AA Shaw Wetland Mitigation Bank credit ledger, which is available for public view online as part of the Regulatory In-lieu Fee and Bank Information Tracking System (RIBITS).[51]

In accordance with the Georgia Erosion and Sedimentation Control Act of 1975, as amended, SIL was required to use best management practices (BMPs) (e.g. silt fencing, etc.) during construction of the Line to avoid and minimize siltation and runoff, and to protect the water quality of downstream wetland areas.[52]

Operations

Potential impacts to surface waters and wetlands could occur during rail operations because of maintenance activities and incidental pollutant discharges. Maintenance activities would include vegetation maintenance in the right-of-way and repairs and maintenance associated with the track, the access road, ditches, culverts, and other associated rail infrastructure. Vegetation would be periodically cleared or trimmed, or use of herbicides in the right-of-way may be required to ensure safe rail operations. Clearing or trimming could temporarily alter wetland vegetation and structure. Any changes in wetland structure could alter the habitat, water quality, and hydrology functions that the wetland provides. Maintenance activities could disturb the ground surface, resulting in mobilized sediment. Any mobilized sediment or improper use of herbicides could reach wetlands and could degrade vegetation communities, wildlife habitat, water quality, and overall wetland productivity.

SIT would be required by the Georgia Erosion and Sediment Control Act of 1975, as amended, to properly maintain existing stormwater infrastructure and use of stormwater BMPs to convey, filter, and dissipate runoff. SIT would also be required by the Georgia Pesticide Control Act of 1976, as amended, to use a licensed pesticide applicator to apply herbicides or other chemicals for vegetation management. Because SIT would have to comply with these regulatory requirements, OEA expects that any impacts to surface waters and wetlands from operations and maintenance activities would be infrequent, brief, localized, and minimal. Therefore, OEA is not recommending any additional mitigation.

[50] SID is a holding of OmniTRAX.

[51] RIBITS, AA Shaw Mitigation Bank Credit Ledger Summary https://ribits.ops.usace.army.mil/ords/f?p=107:43::ledger::43:P43_BANK_ID:1971

[52] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to surface waters and wetlands beyond what has already been described in the construction subsection above. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, there would be no impacts on wetlands from maintenance activities and incidental pollution discharges under the No-Action Alternative.

3.7.3.2 Floodplains

Construction

The connection to the NSR line was constructed in a FEMA mapped 100-year floodplain associated with Dasher Creek. Before construction could occur, SIL was required to consult with the Effingham County Floodplain Administrator to confirm that construction would not result in the water surface elevation (WSE) of the base flood to increase more than one foot at any point on property outside the SGIH. Construction of the rail line embankment resulted in changes to the floodplain width. Accordingly, multiple culverts and drainage ditches were constructed along the Line to mitigate impacts to floodplains. This resulted in WSE rises of less than 1-foot, which were contained to the SGIH. Therefore, in consultation with the Effingham County Floodplain Administrator, it was determined that given the limited and contained floodplain impacts, no Conditional Letter of Map Revision (CLOMR) from FEMA was required.[53]

The Line's connection to the CSXT line was constructed immediately upstream of a designated FEMA 100-year floodplain. The 100-year floodplain is located just outside of the study area. Based on consultation with the Effingham County Floodplain Administrator, it was determined that Effingham County recognizes this area upstream of the mapped floodplain as an "unofficial floodplain." Therefore, impacts to this area were included in the floodplain analysis. While the constructed crossing structure for the CSXT connection resulted in a rise in WSE in the "unofficial floodplain," all rises were less than 1-foot; the impacts were contained to the same property; and the floodplain only extended a maximum of 105 feet. Given that this was located outside of the FEMA Zone AE without Floodway, submittal to FEMA was not required.[54]

The Line was designed and constructed to maintain existing water patterns and flow conditions and provide long-term hydrologic stability by conforming to natural gradients. Impacts to floodplains during construction were mitigated by installing culverts, pipes, and drainage ditches, and by avoiding WSE rise to property outside of the SGIH. As explained above, impacts to floodplains were authorized by the Effingham County Floodplain Administrator.[55]

Operations

Rail operations and maintenance would not result in any changes to WSE within the floodplain beyond what has already been described in the construction subsection above. However, to ensure all project-related culverts are clear of debris to avoid flow blockages, flow alteration, and

[53] HDR, SID LLC/SGIH Shortline: Hydraulics Review Technical Memorandum, January 17, 2020.

[54] HDR, SID LLC/SGIH Shortline: Hydraulics Review Technical Memorandum, January 17, 2020.

[55] HDR, SID LLC/SGIH Shortline: Hydraulics Review Technical Memorandum, January 17, 2020.

increased flooding, OEA is recommending mitigation requiring SIT to inspect all project-related culverts semi-annually (or more frequently, as seasonal flows dictate) for debris accumulation and shall remove and properly dispose of debris promptly (**WAT-MM-1**). If the recommended mitigation measure is implemented, no additional impacts to floodplains are anticipated from operation of the rail line and associated rail yard.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to floodplains beyond what has already been described in the construction subsection above. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease.

3.7.3.3 Water Quality

Construction

Construction of the Line required a conditional Water Quality Certification[56] under Section 401 of the CWA, which was obtained with the NWP authorized by USACE (see in **Section 3.7.3.1**). Permit authorizations from Effingham County for clearing and grading activities were also required in accordance with the provisions of the Erosion and Sedimentation Act of 1975, as amended, the Rules of the Georgia DNR, Environmental Protection Division (EPD), Chapter 391-3-7, and the Code of Effingham County, Chapter 30 – Article III.[57]

During construction, SIL was required to use BMPs (e.g., silt fencing, etc.) during construction to avoid and minimize siltation and runoff, and to protect the water quality of downstream surface waters and wetland areas.[58] In accordance with the Erosion and Sedimentation Act of 1975, as amended, and the Rules of the Georgia DNR, EPD, Chapter 391-3-7, the Line was designed to meet the standards of the Georgia Stormwater Management Manual, Coastal Stormwater Supplement (CSS), and the Effingham County Stormwater Management Local Design Manual (LDM). Further, the SGIH was designed to incorporate Better Site Planning Techniques, Better Site Design Techniques, and Low Impact Development to avoid and minimize water quality impacts.[59] Because SIL was required to comply with these requirements when constructing the Line, OEA has determined that construction of the Line likely had no impacts on water quality.

Operations

[56] USACE Savannah District, 2017 Nationwide Permit Regional Conditions https://www.sas.usace.army.mil/Portals/61/docs/regulatory/2017%20Regional%20Conditions.pdf?ver=2017-03-20-153050-080.

[57] Effingham County Development Services, Clearing and Grading Permit Numbers: LDA-meSGIH3_NS; LDA-meSGIH3; LDA-RFT_SGIH_ph 3; LDA-WFJT17-R_(2)

[58] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

[59] Development of Regional Impact Findings Report prepared by the Coastal Regional Commission (CRC) of Georgia for Effingham County dated July 5, 2012.

Potential impacts to water quality could occur from maintenance activities and incidental pollutant discharges during rail operations. Maintenance activities would include vegetation maintenance in the right-of-way and repairs and maintenance associated with tracks, the access road, ditches, culverts, and other associated rail infrastructure. These activities could disturb the ground surface, resulting in mobilized sediment, and require the use of chemicals (such as herbicides). Any mobilized sediment or the improper use of herbicides could also impact water quality.

Proper maintenance of existing stormwater infrastructure would prevent downstream water quality degradation and help prevent downstream flooding and erosion. Use of stormwater BMPs as required by the Georgia Erosion and Sediment Control Act of 1975, as amended and the Rules of the Georgia DNR, EPD, Chapter 391-3-7, would convey, filter, and dissipate stormwater runoff to minimize impacts to downstream water quality. Because these regulatory requirements enforce strict standards for erosion control, sedimentation prevention, and proper chemical usage, OEA expects that any impacts to water quality from rail operations would be negligible and is not recommending any further mitigation.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line has already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any further impacts to water quality. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, there would be no potential impacts on water quality under the No-Action Alternative.

3.7.3.4 Coastal Zone Management

Construction

The NWP authorizations from USACE included a general CZMA consistency concurrence issued by Georgia DNR. No coastal zone resources (i.e. ocean and adjacent shorelands) exist within or near the project footprint. Therefore, construction of the Line had no adverse impacts to coastal zone management or coastal zone resources.

Operations

Rail operations would not be expected to have impacts on coastal zone management objectives or coastal zone resources because there are no coastal zone resources near the project footprint where operations would take place. Based on the CZMA consistency concurrence associated with the NWP authorizations from USACE, construction of the Line had no impacts to coastal zone resources.

No-Action Alternative

Because construction of the Line already occurred, the No-Action Alternative would not result in any impacts to coastal zone resources. Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, there would be no potential impacts on coastal resources under the No-Action Alternative.

3.7.4 Conclusion

Based on the analysis described above, OEA concludes that the Proposed Action would result in minimal or negligible impacts to surface waters and wetlands, floodplains, groundwater, and water quality.

Construction of the Line resulted in impacts to surface waters and wetlands, which were authorized by USACE and were mitigated with the purchase of compensatory mitigation credits from an approved mitigation bank. Any potential impacts from rail operations would be minimized through maintenance of all existing stormwater conveyance and detention structures, as well as through regulatory requirements, specifically the use of appropriate BMPs where ground disturbing activities are required in accordance with the Erosion and Sedimentation Act of 1975, as amended, and the Rules of the Georgia DNR, EPD, Chapter 391-3-7, and the use of a licensed pesticide applicator when applying herbicides or other chemicals for vegetation management as required by the Georgia Pesticide Control Act of 1976, as amended.

Water quality impacts from construction of the Line were minimized by using appropriate BMPs and construction of required stormwater conveyance and detention structures.[60] Because SIT would be required to comply with the Erosion and Sedimentation Act of 1975, as amended, the Rules of the Georgia DNR, EPD, Chapter 391-3-7, and the Georgia Pesticide Control Act of 1976, as amended, OEA expects any impacts to water quality from rail operations and maintenance activities would be infrequent, brief, localized, and negligible.

Construction of the Line resulted in impacts to floodplains, which were documented and authorized by the Effingham County Floodplain Administrator. Impacts to floodplains during construction were mitigated by the installation of culverts, pipes, and drainage ditches, and avoided WSE rise to property outside of the SGIH. Further, the Line was designed and constructed to maintain existing water patterns and flow conditions and to provide long-term hydrologic stability by conforming to natural gradients. To ensure all project-related culverts are clear of debris to avoid flow blockages, flow alteration, and increased flooding, OEA is recommending mitigation requiring SIT to inspect all project-related culverts semi-annually (or more frequently, as seasonal flows dictate) for debris accumulation and shall remove and properly dispose of debris promptly (**WAT-MM-1**).

3.8 Hazardous Materials and Waste Sites

This section describes the impacts of hazardous materials and waste sites that could have resulted from construction of the Line and the potential impacts that could result from the continued operation of the Line. The study area, data sources, and the approach used to estimate impacts from construction and analyze potential impacts of the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative are described below.

[60] USACE Savannah District Regulatory Division, Permit File Number SAS-2003-20390 Memorandum for Record: Department of the Army Memorandum Documenting General Permit Verification, July 15, 2020.

3.8.1 Approach

OEA defined the study area as the area within a 500-foot buffer from the centerline of the Line. OEA then conducted a search for hazardous material release sites in the study area. For purposes of this analysis, a hazardous material release site is an area that has been affected by a documented release of hazardous material into soil, groundwater, surface water, sediments, and/or air. Hazardous materials are hazardous substances as defined by the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (42 U.S.C. § 103), including hazardous wastes. EPA defines hazardous waste as waste with properties that make it dangerous or potentially harmful to human health or the environment.

To search for documented releases of hazardous materials, OEA obtained an Environmental Data Resource (EDR)[61] to identify known hazardous materials within the study area. An EDR report was generated for the study area on September 11, 2024. EDR searched agency databases in a search radius that meets or exceeds the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) Standard E1527-13 minimum search distance.[62] OEA conducted a review of the EDR database reports to determine if there are any existing or potential properties of concern relative to soil and/or groundwater contamination or properties that could potentially contain hazardous waste in the study area.

3.8.2 Affected Environment

While SIT would have a common obligation to carry hazardous materials upon reasonable request, SIT does not carry hazardous materials under current operations. Additionally, the EDR report did not identify any hazardous materials sites within the study area. However, two sites were identified approximately 0.5 miles northeast of the study area as shown in **Figure 3-8**. Both sites were issued No Further Action Letters (NFA) in 2020 and 2017. A brief description of the two sites is presented below:

- Gate Petroleum #225 (390 South Columbia Avenue, Rincon, GA): Reported to the Leaking Underground Storage Tank database on 02/08/1991. The site received a No Further Action (NFA) with an active remediation system installed at the site on 03/02/2020.
- Enmark #450 (403 South Columbia Avenue, Rincon GA): Reported to the Leaking Underground Storage Tank database on 01/27.2017. The site received an NFA letter on 03/09/2017.

In addition to the EDR report, the online Georgia EPD databases were reviewed to determine if any former or current sites or potential hazardous sites of concern were listed. No additional hazardous sites were found.

[61] EDR is a third-party database report used in the environmental due diligence process that searches relevant state and federal environmental databases.

[62] The exact distance can vary depending on the specific list being searched but is often considered to be a one-mile radius for federal and state hazardous waste site lists and a quarter-mile for other lists.

Figure 3-8 Hazardous Material Site Locations

3.8.3 Environmental Consequences

The Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative would likely not be impacted by sites currently listed as hazardous material or hazardous waste sites. Two sites were identified outside the study area and are not anticipated to affect the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative due to cleanup status and the issuance of an NFA.

Construction

Construction of the Line had no impact on documented hazardous waste sites. Two hazardous waste sites were identified outside the area of disturbance, and construction of the Line would not have disturbed soils that could have been previously contaminated.

Operations

Under the Proposed Action, no impacts from rail operations to hazardous waste sites are expected. SIT does not have oil or fuel tanks greater than 1,320 gallons and will continue to use similar tanks under the Proposed Action. Therefore, SIT is not subject to the Spill Prevention, Control, and Countermeasure (SPCC) regulations (40 CFR 112)[63] and does not currently have a SPCC plan.[64] Additionally, trains do not currently carry hazardous materials and are not anticipated to carry hazardous materials under the Proposed Action.[65] However, if a reasonable request to carry hazardous materials is made, SIT shall conduct any such shipments in compliance with the requirements established by the U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Transportation Security Administration, FRA, and the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration.

No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action Alternative, the Board would not authorize the Proposed Action, and rail operations would cease. Accordingly, no impacts to hazardous materials or hazardous waste sites are expected as a result of the No-Action Alternative.

3.8.4 Conclusion

Under the Proposed Action, trains would not have oil or fuel tanks greater than 1,320 gallons and are not anticipated to carry hazardous materials unless requested to do so. Under the No-Action Alternative, train operations would cease. Because of these reasons, OEA concludes that the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative would result in no impacts from hazardous materials or hazardous waste sites.

[63] A SPCC plan is a document that outlines how a facility will respond to an oil spill. The EPA requires facilities to have an SPCC plan if they meet certain oil storage capacity thresholds.

[64] Docket No. FD 36723, Savannah Industrial Logistics, LLC (SIL) - Construction Exemption & Docket; No. FD 36723 (Sub-No. 1), Savannah Industrial Transportation LLC (SIT)-Lease and Operation Exemption - Line of Savannah Industrial Logistics, LLC in Effingham County, Ga.; Information Request No.1, August 2024

[65] Id.

3.9 Cultural Resources

This section describes the impacts on cultural resources that could have resulted from construction of the Line and the potential impacts that could result from the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative. The study area, data sources, and the approach used to estimate impacts from construction and analyze potential impacts of the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative are described below.

3.9.1 Approach

The Board's decision whether to approve the Proposed Action is a federal action under NEPA and a federal undertaking under Section 106 of the NHPA (54 U.S.C. § 306108). Section 106 regulations at 36 C.F.R. Part 800 require federal agencies to consider the effects of their undertakings on historic properties that are listed in, or eligible for listing in, the NRHP. Historic properties can include buildings, precontact and historic archaeological sites, districts, objects, and structures, as well as traditional cultural properties and landscapes. The term "historic property" also includes properties of religious or cultural significance to Indian Tribes. For the Proposed Action, OEA is coordinating the environmental review process under NEPA with the Section 106 process, and the NEPA term "cultural resources" as used in this section is interchangeable with the Section 106 term "historic properties."

In addition to the NHPA, OEA must also comply with other federal laws that relate to historic properties:

- The Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974, 16 U.S.C. §§ 4–9 – 469c-2, provides for the survey, recovery, and preservation of significant scientific, prehistoric, archaeological, or paleontological data when such data may be destroyed or irreparably lost because of a federal, federally licensed, or federally funded (in part or whole) project.

- American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, 42 U.S.C. § 1996, which provides for the protection and preservation of American Indian sites, possessions, and ceremonial and traditional rites.

OEA increases the efficiency of its environmental review process by concurrently reviewing cultural resources under NEPA and Section 106. To be determined eligible for inclusion in the NRHP, a cultural resource must be important in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, or culture; must possess integrity of location, design, settings, materials, workmanship, feeling, or association; and must meet at least one of the following four criteria (36 C.F.R. Part 800):

A. It is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

B. It is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

C. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represents the work of a master, or that possesses high artistic values, or that

represents a significant distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

D. It has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Properties may be of local, state, or national importance. Typically, historic properties are at least 50 years old, but younger properties may be considered for listing if they are of exceptional importance (Criteria Consideration G). Further, a property must be evaluated by its association with an important historic context and retain integrity of those features necessary to convey its significance (National Park Service 1991).

In this Draft EA, OEA defined the cultural resources study area as the Area of Potential Effects (APE). Pursuant to 36 C.F.R. §§ 800.4(a)(1) and 800.16(d), (y), the APE is the geographic area(s) within which the undertaking may directly or indirectly affect cultural resources. Within the APE, impacts on cultural resources are evaluated for both historic structures (above-ground cultural resources) and archaeology (below-ground cultural resources). To evaluate the potential for the Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative to affect cultural resources, OEA defined the APE as the project footprint within which ground disturbance activities occurred during construction.

In a letter dated May 6, 2024, OEA initiated Section 106 consultation with the Georgia SHPO, THPOs, and Tribal governments with a possible interest in the Proposed Action. OEA consulted and coordinated with the Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town, Catawba Indian Tribe of South Carolina, Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and Seminole Tribe of Florida (see **Appendix A**). No responses have been received from any Tribes to date.

3.9.2 Affected Environment

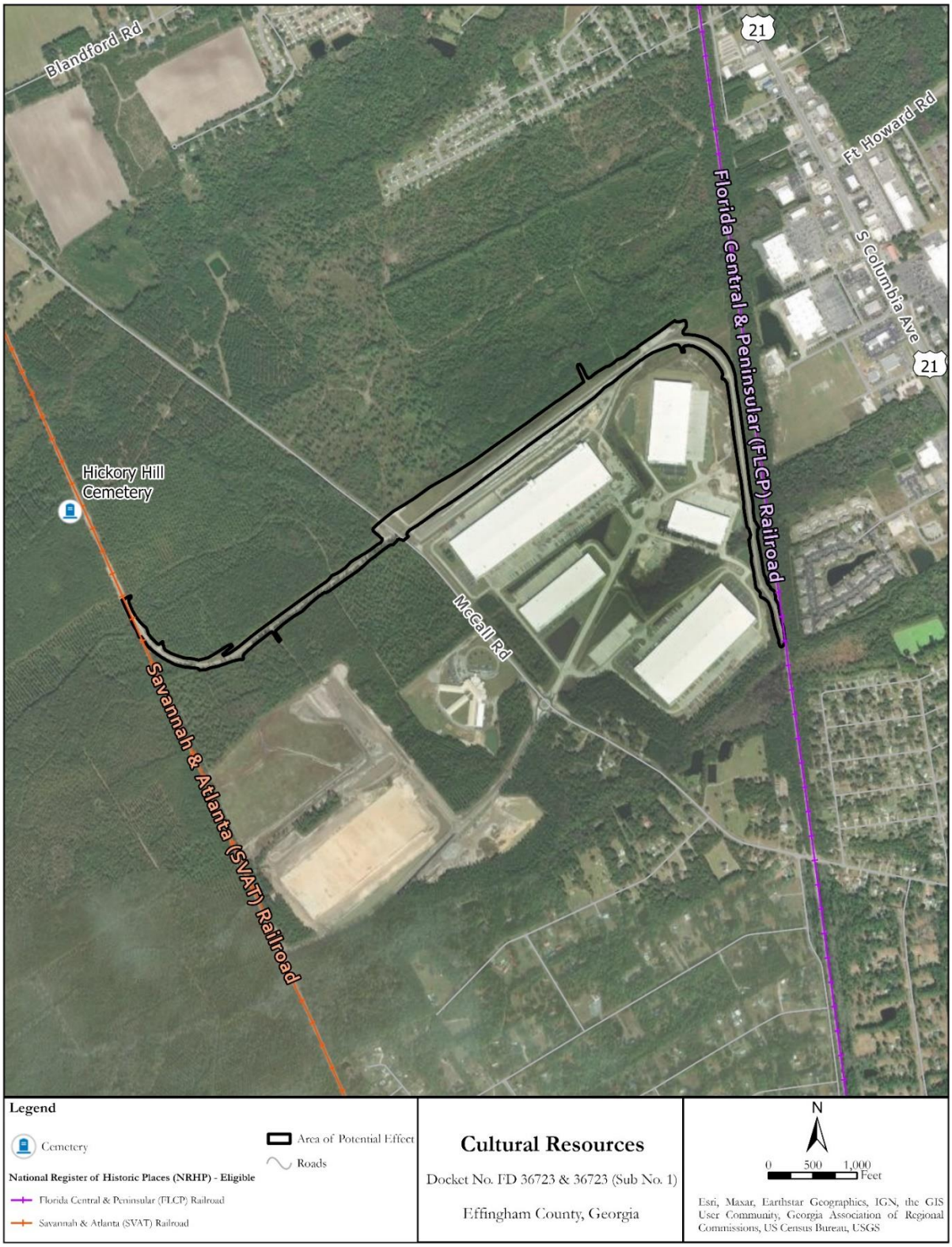
OEA conducted background research on the study area, including a review of Georgia's Natural, Archaeological, and Historic Resources Geographic Information System (GNAHRGIS), to examine information on previous cultural resource surveys, archaeological sites, historic buildings, structures, landscapes, and districts within the APE.

Research using GNAHRGIS revealed that there are two previously recorded NRHP-eligible historic properties located in the APE. These include the Savannah & Atlanta Railroad (SVAT, now under CSXT ownership) to the west, and the Florida Central & Peninsular Railroad (FLCP, now under NSR ownership) to the east (see **Figure 3-9**).

There have been a number of previous cultural resource studies in this location associated with other planned development activities. In 2004, R.S. Webb & Associates performed a Phase I cultural resources survey for 2,189 acres (885.9 hectares) of the approximate 3,239-acre (1,310.8 hectares) SGIH, previously referred to as the "Rincon Research Tract" (Gantt et al. 2004).[66] The remaining 1,050 acres (424.9 hectares) of the tract was designated as wetlands. The Phase I cultural resources survey included a literature review and an intensive field survey within the

[66] International Paper Realty Corporation. Phase I Cultural Resource Survey, Rincon Research Tract Draft Report, June 4, 2004

Figure 3-9 Cultural Resources



Proposed Action's APE. This survey did not identify any historic properties. The current APE is located within this large, previously surveyed, tract of land.

Between 2019 and 2022, the area was again surveyed and evaluated as part of USACE permitting efforts associated with the Line and the SGIH. As part of those permitting efforts, two historic properties were identified, both located within the current APE. These included the SVAT line at the eastern end of the APE, and the FLCP line at the western end of the APE. Both railroads were previously determined to be eligible for listing on the NRHP in 2019 as documented in the SHPO's *Georgia's Railroads, 1833-2015: Historic Context and Statewide Survey*.

3.9.3 Proposed Action Environmental Consequences

Construction

As discussed above, two historic properties are located within the APE of the previously constructed Line – the SVAT line and the FLCP line. In a letter dated June 4, 2024, the SHPO stated that due to the scope and location of the work, existing modern intrusions, and existing ground disturbance, the Proposed Action would have no adverse effect to the two historic properties, as defined in 36 C.F.R. Part 800.5(d)(1) (see **Appendix A**). After reviewing all the previous studies and documentation associated with the Proposed Action and considering the input from the SHPO, OEA has determined that construction of the Proposed Action had no adverse effect on cultural resources.

Operations

The continued operation of the Line under the Proposed Action would have no adverse impacts to the two historic properties within the APE because the Line is currently operating and the increase in projected traffic would not affect the two historic properties. After reviewing all the previous studies and documentation associated with the Proposed Action and considering the no adverse effect determination by the SHPO, OEA has determined that continued operation of the Line would have no adverse impact on cultural resources.

No-Action Alternative

Under the No-Action Alternative, all rail service would cease, and no trains would operate on the Line. OEA has determined that the No-Action Alternative would have no adverse impact on the two historic properties within the APE because the rail line would remain in place, and there would be no changes to the two historic properties.

3.9.4 Conclusion

OEA has determined that the Proposed Action would have no adverse impact to historic properties due to the scope and location of the work, existing modern intrusions, and existing ground disturbance. Similarly, the No-Action Alternative would also have no adverse impact to historic properties because the existing rail line would remain in place, rail operations would cease, and there would be no changes to the two historic properties.

3.10 Additional Impacts

This section describes other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects and actions that might have impacts that could combine with the impacts of the Proposed Action. Because the Proposed Action would not involve any new rail construction, as construction of the Line was completed in 2020, this analysis focuses on the incremental impacts of rail operations when added to impacts of other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects and actions. The sections that follow describe the approach, affected environment, and environmental consequences for this analysis.

3.10.1 Approach

OEA defined the study area and analysis period for other impacts to include reasonably foreseeable projects and actions that could affect the same resource areas as the Proposed Action. For this analysis, OEA considered the reasonably foreseeable projects and actions discussed below.

3.10.2 Past, Present, and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Projects and Actions

Based on a review of publicly available data and resources from GDOT, SIL and SIT, and Balfour Beatty (a construction company), OEA identified the following reasonably foreseeable independent projects and actions.

Savannah Gateway Industrial Hub, The SGIH is a 2,600-acre multimodal logistics park with active development underway. As part of the Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development (GRAD) Program, the SGIH offers sites of various sizes and configurations that are fast-tracked for construction. Development is divided into four areas. [67] Area 1 is between the CSXT line and McCall Road. Land south of the Line in this area has been developed, and current tenants of SGIH are located here, including the current shipper. Area 2 is between McCall Road and the NSR line. Area 3 is between the NSR line and Effingham Parkway (which is currently under construction). Area 4 is between Effingham Parkway and Hodgeville Road. See **Figure 2.1** for a map of the areas.

Effingham Parkway, GDOT Project Id: 0006700. This proposed project consists of constructing a two-lane roadway that begins at State Route 30 and ends at Blue Jay Road. The typical section of roadway is proposed to have 12-foot lanes with 10-foot outside shoulders (including 6.5-foot paved) on an 80-foot right-of-way. Total length of the project is approximately 6.4 miles. Approximately 1.5 miles of the parkway transects the SGIH (see **Figure 2.1**). Construction of Effingham Parkway began in September 2021 and is scheduled for completion in April 2025 (Balfour Beatty, 2025).

3.10.3 Other Impacts by Resource

As discussed in **Section 3.1** through **Section 3.9** of this Draft EA, the impacts of the Proposed Action range from no impacts to minimal impacts.. OEA reviewed the resource areas assessed in this Draft EA to determine if there would be reasonably foreseeable impacts from construction of

[67] Savannah Gateway Industrial Hub, Multimodal Logistic Park Near Port of Savannah (available at: https://savannahgatewayindustrialhub.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Savannah-Gateway-Industrial-Hub-_March-2025-1.pdf.)

the SGIH and the Effingham Parkway that could combine with the operational impacts associated with the Proposed Action.

For resources in which there would be no impact from the Proposed Action, there would be no beneficial or adverse impacts to combine with or add to. These resource areas include:

- Air Quality
- Hazardous Materials and Waste Sites
- Land Use, Zoning, and Local Plans
- Cultural Resources

The following examines the potential impacts of the Proposed Action when added to the impacts of the independent projects listed above.

3.10.3.1 Transportation Delay and Safety

OEA anticipates that delays from the Proposed Action at the McCall Road at-grade crossing would be minimal and would not cause the LOS to decrease below LOS A. Additional construction of the SGIH could result in an increase in vehicle, truck, and rail transportation. However, construction of Effingham Parkway would provide an alternate north-south route for trucks and vehicles to avoid McCall Road. Additionally, the Proposed Action has the potential to provide an alternative to truck transportation, further reducing truck traffic on McCall Road associated with the industrial park. Therefore, OEA does not anticipate that the Proposed Action would result in additional impacts when combined with the impacts of the SGIH and Effingham Parkway.

3.10.3.2 Energy

The continued operation of the Line would require diesel for the trains. The consumption of diesel would likely increase compared to current rail operations due to the anticipated increase in train traffic as the SGIH develops.

Regarding vehicles, there will likely be benefits as well as impacts related to the development and construction of the SGIH and the construction of Effingham Parkway. A potential benefit may include additional routes for vehicles into and out of the SGIH property, thereby reducing the number of vehicles idling at the existing at-grade crossing at McCall Road. Alternatively, based on the anticipated development, traffic may increase as the development and construction of the SGIH continues because trucks may need to deliver more goods between potential additional shippers and the Line, resulting in an increase of vehicle usage and fuel consumption.

Due to the energy efficiency of increased rail usage to and from the SGIH property, coupled with a more extensive transportation network, OEA does not anticipate additional impacts on energy resources.

3.10.3.3 Noise and Vibration

Only projects adjacent to or very close to the rail line footprint could potentially result in additional impacts related to noise and vibration. The 65 DNL noise contours for rail operations extend 132 feet from the centerline of the Line under the Proposed Action. Noise sources further

away may cause small noise increases, which typically would not be noticeable. Vibration is even more localized; therefore, additional vibration impacts would be unlikely.

Planned SGIH construction is located north and west of the Proposed Action, and Effingham Parkway is located west of the Proposed Action. All areas are greater than 132 feet from the centerline of the Line. Thus, because OEA does not expect any noise impacts from the other reasonably foreseeable projects, there would be no additional noise impacts.

3.10.3.4 Biological Resources

Under the Proposed Action, trains would continue to operate at 10 mph. Collisions or crushing that may result from operations would be more likely to affect smaller, less mobile species, but would be expected to have negligible effects to species populations. Development and construction of the SGIH, as well as the construction of Effingham Parkway, have the potential to impact biological resources due to vegetation removal, which could result in decreased and fragmented wildlife habitat. However, because the Proposed Action would not include the removal of any vegetation, OEA does not expect the Proposed Action and the other reasonably foreseeable projects to create any additional impacts to biological resources.

3.10.3.5 Water Resources

OEA did not analyze potential impacts on groundwater, Coastal Zone Management, and floodplains, because, as described in **Section 3.7**, OEA expects that rail operations would not impact groundwater, coastal zone management objectives, or coastal zone resources. OEA determined that, the recommended mitigation (**WAT-MM-1**) is imposed, operation of the Line would also not impact floodplains.

OEA determined that, because SIT would be required to comply with the Georgia Erosion and Sediment Act of 1975, as amended; the Rules of the Georgia DNR, EPD, Chapter 391-3-7; and the Georgia Pesticide Control Act of 1976, as amended, operation of the Line would result in infrequent, brief, localized and minimal impacts to surface waters (streams) and wetlands and water quality. The SGIH and Effingham Parkway could contribute to impacts on surface waters (streams) and wetlands and water quality. Based on a review of the previous wetland delineations and proposed site plans, the SGIH construction would likely result in surface waters and wetland impacts. However, both the SGIH and Effingham Parkway would require a Nationwide 404 permit under the CWA from USACE for minimal impacts to wetlands (less than 0.5 acres) if filling of wetlands cannot be avoided during construction. Therefore, OEA does not anticipate impacts from the Proposed Action to result in additional impacts to water resources when combined with the impacts from SGIH and Effingham Parkway.

3.10.4 Conclusion

As explained above, OEA does not anticipate that the Proposed Action would result in additional impacts when combined with the impacts of the development and construction of the SGIH and the construction of Effingham Parkway.

Chapter 4
Mitigation

This chapter describes mitigation measures that, if imposed by the Board, would avoid, minimize, or mitigate potential environmental impacts of the Proposed Action. In this Draft EA, OEA is preliminarily recommending one mitigation measure based on the results of OEA's environmental analysis. If the Board decides to grant SIL and SIT's request for after-the-fact authority to construct and operate the Line, the mitigation measure set out in this chapter could become a condition of the Board's decision. Because the Line has already been constructed, OEA is preliminarily recommending mitigation resulting from impacts associated with rail operations under the Proposed Action.

4.1 Conditioning Power of the Board

The Board has the authority to impose conditions to mitigate environmental impacts, but that authority is not limitless. Any mitigation measure the Board imposes must relate directly to the transaction before the Board, must be reasonable, and must be supported by the record before the Board. OEA's consistent practice has been to recommend mitigation only for those impacts that would result directly from a Proposed Action. The Board does not require mitigation for pre-existing environmental conditions.

Sometimes applicants propose voluntary mitigation to address potential environmental impacts of their proposals. Voluntary mitigation could replace, supplement, or extend further than mitigation measures the Board might otherwise impose. The Board's practice is to require compliance with any voluntary mitigation agreed to by applicants in any final decision authorizing a Proposed Action. SIL and SIT have not submitted any voluntary mitigation to date. However, as explained in the Draft EA, SIT's compliance with regulatory requirements applicable to operating the Line would minimize potential environmental impacts.

4.2 Preliminary Nature of the Mitigation Process

OEA's preliminary recommended mitigation measures are based on information available to date, consultation with appropriate agencies, and the environmental analysis presented in this Draft EA. OEA emphasizes that the recommended mitigation measure is preliminary and invites the public and agencies to comment on the proposed mitigation. For OEA to assess the comments effectively, it is critical that the comments be specific regarding any desired mitigation and the reasons why the suggested mitigation would be appropriate.

After OEA issues the Draft EA for public comment and the public comment period closes, OEA will prepare a Final EA. The Final EA will respond to all substantive comments, include additional analyses if appropriate, and make final recommendations to the Board on what mitigation to impose. After the conclusion of the EA process, the Board will make its final decision considering both the transportation merits of the proceeding and the full environmental record — which includes this Draft EA, the Final EA, all public and agency comments received, and OEA's final recommended mitigation.

4.3 OEA's Preliminary Recommended Mitigation

The following section provides OEA's preliminary recommended mitigation measure. OEA recommends that, if the Board grants after-the-fact authority to construct and operate the proposed rail line, such authority should be subject to the mitigation measure identified below. If a resource area is not listed below, OEA did not identify any adverse impacts that warrant mitigation and has therefore not proposed mitigation measures for this resource area.

4.3.1 Water Resources

WAT-MM-1. During rail operations, SIT shall ensure that all culverts and bridges along the previously constructed rail line are clear of debris to avoid flow blockages, flow alteration, and increased flooding. SIT shall inspect all culverts and bridges semi-annually (or more frequently, as seasonal flows dictate) for debris accumulation and shall remove and properly dispose of debris promptly.