

Loggers protest closing Linder Road to through truck traffic

By Tommy Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — Local logger Curtis Bonner complained to the County Commission on Monday about the fact that through-commercial trucks were recently banned on the Linder Road.

"It's a big problem to me," Bonner said. "I run trucks, and I need to go through the Linder Road. I got a ticket because there's a sign there that says 'no trucks'."

But, Bonner said, if he uses the route through Butler he cannot get a 40-foot trailer from

Ala. 17 onto Ala. 10 without crossing the center line of the highway in an attempt to make the precarious turn.

"I've been driving a truck for 47 years," he said. "If somebody hits my truck while it's across the center line, then my truck is automatically at fault."

Commissioner Henry Lovette, who works part time as a policeman for the Town of Butler, agreed.

"That's the law," he said.

"I want to know if the judge and commissioners can fix it so we can go through the Linder Road?" Bonner asked.

He said he spoke to someone at the Alabama Dept. of Transportation in Montgomery who told him that unless a road had weight-restricted bridges or other hazardous situations, trucks could not be banned from roads.

"Just because citizens complain about trucks doesn't mean anything," he said.

Commissioner Dandy Brown said that he personally visited residents who live along the road and that all but one agreed that truck drivers who used the road often drove recklessly and way over the speed

limit.

"I checked this before we put up signs," Brown said.

Probate Judge D'Wayne May asked attorney Lee McPhearson to check into the matter and report back at the May 14th Commission meeting.

On a similar road concern, two residents of the Mt. Sterling community asked to be on the agenda for the May 7th meeting but were not present.

May said that the men operate a shop in the community and that the road is also posted with "no trucks" signs. "They were given a warning

and told if the officer caught them back in there they would get ticket," May said.

Commissioner Brown said that the ruling was not intended to stop the man and his son-in-law, or anyone else, from getting to and from their shops.

Commissioner Lovette said he would be glad to personally speak to all local law enforcement officers and tell them that the posting of the signs does not ban people who have commercial interests on those roads from using trucks to get to and from their places of business.

County officials may call for federal review of railroad

By Tommy Campbell
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BUTLER — The derailment of a freight train carrying components of the space shuttle's solid rocket booster engines last week near Myrtlewood may spur local officials to call for an in-depth federal review of the railroad and its safety and maintenance practices.

"Choctaw County had some of the first units on the scene," EMA Director Bill Gibson said at the May 7th meeting of the County Commission. "The incident could have become a major disaster had a fire occurred."

The shuttle's booster rockets were packed with aluminum perchlorate, a solid, rubbery-like fuel that burns profusely when ignited.

Fortunately, Gibson, said, none of the fuel spilled.

A number of local officials expressed irritation following the incident last week because they said that neither NASA nor the railroad bothered to notify authorities that such a sensitive and potentially hazardous shipment would be passing through Choctaw County.

"I think it would be appropriate for us to approach the feds to conduct an in-depth review of this railroad, especially around maintenance concerns," Gibson said.

The EMA head said the Meridian and Bigbee line has experienced several derailments in the past few years.

"There were six injuries in the incident last week," he said. "If this doesn't get the federal government's attention, I don't know what will."

Gibson said he would like to send detailed letters to the National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Railroad Administration asking for an inspection of the line's tracks from one end to the other.

"Had that train caught on fire it would have been a major disaster," he

said. "My thought is that they need to look at the system rather than at the incident." Gibson said that the derailments in the past have been in at least three counties in Alabama and one in Mississippi.

The train had already come through Yantley, Cromwell, Jachin and Pennington, Gibson said. Had such a derailment occurred in a populated area the result could have been deadly.

"It could have derailed anywhere, and it could have caused the loss of lives," Commissioner C.D. "Budd" Ruffin commented. "This just reinforces what I have been saying. Many of those derailments have been human error and equipment malfunction where new rails were laid over old track beds and old cross ties. I have traveled that whole route and I have seen a lot of these derailments, including chemical cars and box cars, and it looks to me like if something gets loose there could be the loss of many lives."

Ruffin has been an outspoken critic of the M&B ever since the company built a new switching yard in Yantley two years ago — almost in the front yards of several residents of Ruffin's district — which has resulted in incessant complaints of noise, air pollution from diesel smoke, crews throwing litter from passing and idling trains, of trains blocking county roads for sometimes hours at a time, and of vagrant hoboes "riding the rails" who frequently hop off the cars and ramble around the community when the trains slow down at the switching facility.

Probate Judge D'Wayne May agreed that some correspondence should be sent to federal agencies, but said that when dealing with a matter of such importance, the letters should be drafted with legal advice from attorney Lee McPhearson so that the county does not face any legal repercussions.

Gibson said he would get with the lawyer and draft a letter for the Commission's review at next Monday's

meeting. If the board approves, the letter will be sent to the appropriate federal regulatory agency.

"We need to show that the Commission is concerned about this catastrophic event that occurred just after the train left Choctaw County," May said.

Both Gibson and Ruffin said they have discussed their ongoing concerns with M&B officials and with federal authorities in Washington.

However, all agreed that they do not want to penalize the railroad, only to make sure that the trains are operated safely and in consideration of the rights of the citizens of Choctaw County.

Gibson said that it is vital to the operation of the Georgia-Pacific paper mill at Pennington, and is now the only rail route through Choctaw County.

"What used to be a sleepy little railroad that hauled cars to the mill a couple of times a day has now become a major rail operation with trains coming through here from all parts of the country," Gibson said.

The M&B line was owned by the local paper mill until about 10 years ago when it was sold. Genesee and Wyoming is the current owner.

At the site of Wednesday's derailment in the Tombigbee River swampland near Myrtlewood, about 300 feet of a 12-15-foot high section of wooden trestle collapsed, causing two locomotive engines and a couple of rail cars to tumble onto their sides into a wooded area beside the tracks.

"It would be equally as important to keep a railroad coming through Choctaw County just as it would be to keep the airport open," May commented.

"That is correct, Gibson replied. "The paper mill would be extremely crippled if they did not have the railroad."

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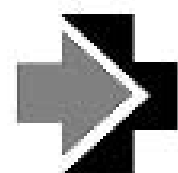
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Thursday, May 10

10 a.m. - 1 p.m.

BWWMH Main Lobby



Tombigbee
Healthcare Authority

334-289-4000
105 Highway 80 East
Demopolis, Alabama
36732

www.bwwmh.com