

SA, Swaziland proposed rail link on hold

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14 May 2014

Feasibility studies for South Africa and Swaziland's proposed R17bn rail link are still underway, pushing its construction out until at least 2017, Transnet Freight Rail General Manager Cleo Shiceka said.



Construction on a new railway linking South Africa and Swaziland will be delayed until 2017 according to Cleo Shiceka of Transnet Freight Rail. Image: Transnet Freight Rail.

The two countries announced the project in 2012, and suggested at the time that construction would begin in 2013. The railway line is set to increase the rail capacity of general freight and coal exports and is will be the largest rail expansion project undertaken in the region since 1976.

It will link Lothair in Mpumalanga with Sidvokodvo in Swaziland and free-up capacity on Transnet's network, allowing it to move additional coal to the Richards Bay Coal Terminal.

Feasibility studies were in their final stage, and would be completed by October, Shiceka said on the sidelines of a briefing about the Southern African Railways Association conference set to take place at the end of the month.

Geotechnical and environmental studies were still outstanding. Once that was complete, she said agreements with landowners, environmental impact assessments and a socio-economic impact assessment was required before construction could begin.

Its construction included a new single line covering 146km to be built by Transnet. It would have an initial capacity of 15m tons a year.

Swaziland Railways Chief Executive Stephenson Ngubane said the rail link was critical for the flow of goods in the region.

Rail transportation is making a comeback, after years of neglect. The market share of rail in southern Africa had dropped to just 13% by 2000, down from 85% in the 1980s and 32% in the 1990s," Ngubane said.

The Southern African Railway Association (SARA) is seeking greater harmonisation in policy and technology between railway operators in different countries. It hopes to lobby governments to prioritise rail as a means of transportation.

In 2010, Southern African transport ministers agreed to exempt railway operators from paying a levy on the fuel used for locomotives. Rail operators have argued that a chunk of the fuel levy was used to improve road infrastructure, to the disadvantage of rail.

Swaziland is one of a few countries that has implemented that decision. It exempts operators from paying a fuel levy at the pump. South Africa, however, has no exemption for rail operators, Shiceka said.

The SARA conference is expected to detail regional projects which could include greater private sector involvement. Rail investments and maintenance have been almost non-existent in most countries in southern Africa.

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