

The two GP15-1s that serve as the primary power for Northern Lines Railway head east toward the railroad's St. Cloud Yard. The locomotives wear Burlington Northern's Cascade Green scheme in recognition of the line's history.



NORTH BY NORTHERN LINES

Minnesota railroad is short on mileage
but long on customer service

Story and photos by Steve Glischinski



You have to look twice when watching trains in St. Cloud, Minn. In the city's large yard, what appears to be a pair of Burlington Northern Cascade Green GP15-1s can be seen switching five days a week. It's not BN reincarnated, but short line Northern Lines Railway, which painted its locomotives in BN green in a nod to the former Burlington Northern track it operates.

Northern Lines is short in mileage — 17 route-miles — but its emphasis on customer service and growth is out of proportion to its stature. Consider that the railroad serves approximately 20 customers in the St. Cloud area (2019 population 67,924), ranging from oil and gas recyclers to corrugated box manufacturers. While there has been churn — the railroad has lost and gained customers over the last 16 years — volume is up 25%, with new business making up for what has been lost. Northern Lines has also remained injury-free the last seven years.

GREAT NORTHERN HERITAGE

While the Northern Pacific main line sliced through the east side of St. Cloud, it really was a Great Northern city. From St. Cloud, GN's

secondary main line to Fergus Falls and Moorhead headed northwest, while joint trackage to Minneapolis shared with NP headed southeast. Another line to Minneapolis, the "West Side Line," followed the west bank of the Mississippi. Branch lines took GN trains east to Brook Park and a connection with the line to Duluth/Superior, and southwest to the division point of Willmar. Operations centered at the GN yard and depot on the west side of the Mississippi River, which flows through heart of the city. In adjoining Waite Park on the west side of St. Cloud, GN maintained large carshops.

Burlington Northern took over all these lines in 1970. In 1975, BN cut back the West Side Line, and in the 1980s went on a spree of cutting that, by the end of the decade, left only short stubs of the Willmar Line from St. Cloud to Cold Spring, and the Fergus Falls line from St. Cloud to Avon. The line west of Avon to Fergus Falls and Moorhead was sold to short line Otter Tail Valley in 1986; Otter Tail pulled up the Avon-Fergus Falls line in 1991 (the segment from St. Joseph to Avon was abandoned in 2000). The Waite Park carshops were closed in the mid-1980s.

BN and successor BNSF Railway continued to operate the lines until 2005, when Northern Lines

Northern Lines No. 421 backs into an industry track on the St. Joseph Branch. The railroad has several spurs off the St. Joe line to serve local industries, which have returned to rail shipping thanks to Northern Lines' more frequent, personalized service.

Railway was formed by Anacostia Rail Holdings Co. Anacostia operates six short lines, including Chicago South Shore & South Bend, Louisville & Indiana, New York & Atlantic, and Pacific Harbor Line. Northern Lines operates under a lease agreement with BNSF, with the larger railroad retaining track ownership. In 2016, the lease was extended through 2025.

Consider Northern Lines routes as a giant letter "Y" lying in an east-west direction. The base of the Y is at St. Cloud Yard, where it connects with BNSF. The St. Joseph Branch extends from the yard and continues on to St. Joseph, approximately 7 miles.

The other leg of the Y is the Rockville Branch that extends southwest from a connection with the St. Joseph line to Rockville, approximately 7 miles. Business on the Rockville line includes a propane terminal operated by Wenner Gas Co. in Rockville, and Martin Marietta Materials' aggregate quarry in Waite Park, which provides ballast for BNSF track projects.

Northern Lines trains once went west of Rockville an additional 7 miles to Cold Spring. The last customer in Cold Spring, Wenner Gas, only received a few cars a week. Working with the railroad, it moved operations east to Rockville and expanded its terminal there in 2014. The \$10 million





Northern Lines' two GP15-1s head east across the Sauk River returning from the west end of the St. Joseph Branch on Nov. 5, 2020. This line hosted Burlington Northern's *Western Star* passenger train until Amtrak was formed in 1971.

expansion of the Rockville Propane Terminal created what is reportedly one of the largest rail-propane transfer facilities in the U.S. The 11-acre site can unload 10 tank cars simultaneously and store 620,000 gallons of propane in 16 tanks. Two truck-loading bays can fill up to six tank cars per hour. Track capacity was increased to accommodate 57 loaded tank cars and 47 empties. With the expanded terminal, there was no reason to go to Cold Spring. Owner BNSF abandoned the western 3 miles of the line, with the remaining 4 miles intact but unused.

Until 2018, the railroad continued east of St. Cloud Yard 2 miles to the now-closed Quad/Graphics printing plant. That required a move to see-saw across the BNSF main line as well as crossing busy U.S. Route 10. After the plant closed, this track was pulled up. Since Northern Lines no longer operated on the BNSF main, it saved costly installation of positive train control equipment on its locomotives.

Northern Lines' primary commodities are agriculture, stone/minerals, chemicals, lumber, construction material, polymers, paper products, and steel and metals.



As seen by looking down North 37th Avenue in St. Cloud, Northern Lines No. 421 backs into a cut of cars before heading east to St. Cloud Yard. The route was once part of Great Northern's secondary route from St. Cloud to Moorhead, Minn.

GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

"BNSF was looking at both cost reduction and growth," says Peter Gilbertson, co-founder and president of Anacostia Rail Holdings, discussing the origins of Northern Lines. "We had a lot of experience with BN and BNSF over the years, including the Otter Tail Valley, which we started and later sold to RailAmerica. Railroads periodically look at their networks and decide whether it makes sense to be running some lines. This was one of those times when BNSF

was looking at their network and doing shortline deals."

Gilbertson says part of the reason Anacostia was interested was the growth of the St. Cloud area and its ready access to Interstate 94. "[St. Cloud] is really a kind of economic growth center in a variety of ways. That's always important to look at in these transactions. Because of that, there was some opportunities for traffic growth. Also, we looked at capital needs. The lines were in reasonably good shape, and didn't have

any major deferred capital, such as bridge issues.” Having the railroad connect directly to BNSF’s Northern Transcontinental main line, with its connectivity to the rest of the system, was another plus. Anacostia won a bidding process, and chose the name “Northern Lines” as a reference to the line’s Great Northern legacy.

When Northern Lines took over, it began providing more frequent service, says Gilbertson. “We got out and talked to customers to see what they wanted and needed. We really tried to communicate with them and understand their needs.”

BNSF retained pricing authority and the short line received a per-car fee. “One lever you don’t have with customers is rates,” says Gilbertson. “They are established by the Class I railroad. They aren’t customized to the short line; they are part of a bigger pricing regime. Several years after startup we advocated for a change, which BNSF agreed to, to pay us a percentage of their revenue, so on the more profitable business we would make more money, and less profitable business we would make less. The argument for that was if we don’t know what you [BNSF] are making off it, we may spend time getting traffic that isn’t very profitable for you and vice versa. So share that information, get us that market information, and we will behave accordingly. That’s been a helpful evolution.”

SHORTLINE SERVICE

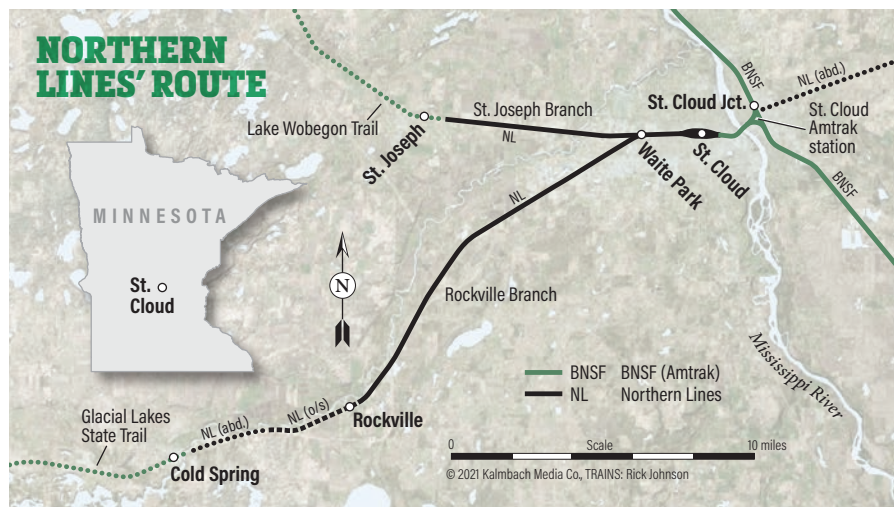
One of the reasons for the railroad’s success is the “continuity of the team,” says Eric Jakubowski, Anacostia’s chief commercial officer. “For short lines, that is critical,” he says. “BNSF has been aggressive in taking lines back, and that seemed like their strategy when our agreement came up for renewal [in 2015]. But we were able to convince them that there was a lot of organic growth; that we had acquired more of that because we were willing to be flexible in terms of our service. They rejiggered the deal, and we were happy to have another chance.

“BNSF has been sound to work with when we have brought them opportunities, and that’s really the key to making it work.”

An example of that service flexibility, Jakubowski says, is at the end of the St. Joseph line. There, the railroad serves Borgert Products Inc., makers of concrete pavers and other concrete products for contractors in 12 states and three Canadian provinces. There was no switch by



Northern Lines Lead Transportation Specialist Mark Muraski watches as a switch crew picks up an empty lumber car at Manion’s Building Supplies, a customer on the west end of the St. Joseph Branch.



the Borgert facility, so the railroad agreed to let Borgert load and unload off the main track without any means of running around the cars. The railroad had to move cars back and forth using backing maneuvers, but since Borgert was the last customer on the line, Northern Lines agreed to it.

Previously, Borgert used trucks.

That led to more business. Next to Borgert was a Knife River Corp. cement plant. “Knife River knew the deal that Borgert had, so they said ‘How about me?’” Jakubowski says. What started as a two-car spot has grown into a full-fledged terminal, with an expansion that features a new three-track yard for transloading with 50-

car capacity. NLR hopes it grows into 1,000 carloads of cement yearly, and will lead to other commodities such as inbound fly ash, cement mixing, aggregates for road construction, and road sand. “Those are success stories because we were willing to give the customer the benefit of the doubt,” Jakubowski says. “We were able to make that initial hurdle manageable; somebody’s testing the marketplace. That’s something short lines can do that Class I [lines] can’t.”

More new business came in 2012, when Archer-Daniels-Midland constructed a shuttle-loading grain elevator between Waite Park and Rockville. ADM needed both rail and road access, and found it with Interstate 94 nearby and Northern Lines providing rail service. The terminal features a loop track and can load 110-car BNSF trains of grain and soybeans.

The ability to think outside the box presented itself in 2020. Maiers Transport & Warehousing was awarded a project to



GP15-1 No. 421 passes the new tracks leading into Knife River Cement, which became a customer after seeing how the railroad worked with an adjacent business. At left, the new loading facility under construction at the cement business.

transload and transport some 27,000 crane stabilization mats. The company was already a big Northern Lines customer, but it could not handle the project at its St. Cloud facility. Its two 500-foot tracks and 115,000-square-foot warehouse were mostly occupied with other projects.

Maiers went to Northern Lines President Justin Chalich seeking a solution. There was room at St. Cloud Yard to receive and spot centerbeam cars, which would arrive over several months loaded with the 20-foot-by-5-foot mats. Adjacent to the receiving track, there was sufficient space to forklift the mats to temporary ground storage, and then reload them onto the 1,500 trucks needed to complete the haul to northern Minnesota.

The destination was the \$2.9 billion

U.S. portion of the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline replacement project. There the mats would be laid on the ground to form stable work platforms for the massive construction equipment. After safety training by railroad crews, Maiers' workers and contractors performed all the transloading work, loading and dispatching as many as 43 truckloads on one day. When the centerbeam cars arrived, they needed to be unchained and unloaded in stages — first a group of mats from one side of the car, then a group from the other side — to keep the cars in balance. Then the mats were placed on flatbed trucks and resecured. The project started in February 2020 and concluded in August. Overall, the railroad handled 350 carloads. In the past, NLR has handled other "specialty" moves, such as eight trainloads of wind turbine blades, generators, and towers delivered for unloading at Rockville in 2016.

Working with BNSF and expanding business opportunities is the responsibility of Katie Sackett, Northern Lines' senior director of sales & marketing. "We're working together [with BNSF] as a team, because what we do affects them, and what they do

affects us," she says. Sackett says her job is to "deepen the partnership with existing customers and help them organically grow their businesses." Part of that effort, Sackett says, is to promote the railroad through economic and industrial development projects with local and state offices. She hopes to expand transload and storage business as well. "We want to maximize opportunities by offering creative ways for the customer to improve logistics operations with assets that may be currently underutilized," she says.

'GREEN' MOTIVE POWER

Northern Lines relied on leased GP7 and GP9 rebuilds at startup. Two were former Belt Railway of Chicago GP10s painted in that railroad's scheme, while another was former Iowa Interstate GP7 No. 400. The ex-BRC units were replaced in 2009 by an ex-Burlington Northern GP10 in faded BN green. "Since BNSF wasn't using the green, and we had a green locomotive, we decided we'll just use that," Gilbertson says. In 2015, the railroad acquired former CSX/Seaboard Air Line GP16 No. 1610, and hand-painted it in an inexpensive BN green to match the other.

By 2019, the Geeps were growing tired. The railroad went to lessor GATX for newer power, and chose a pair of GP15-1s. The four-axle GP15-1 was produced between 1976 and 1982, with 310 built for four owners, including Chicago & North Western

NORTHERN LINES LOCOMOTIVES

No.	Model, built	History
400	GP7, 11/1952	Rock Island 1275; returned to lessor
421	GP15-1, 9/1977	Frisco 122; in service
422	GP15-1, 6/1976	Chicago & North Western 4413; in service
1411	GP10, 9/1950	Rebuilt by Burlington Northern from Great Northern GP7 611; returned to lessor
1610	GP16, 10/56	Rebuilt by Seaboard Coast Line, originally Seaboard Air Line GP9 1970; in service
RLCX 1703	GP10, 4/1951	Built as Great Northern GP7 623, rebuilt to Belt Railway of Chicago GP10 483; returned to lessor
RLCX 1704	GP10, 5/1951	Built as Belt Railway of Chicago GP7 471, rebuilt to GP10; returned to lessor

and St. Louis-San Francisco. One reason for selecting GP15-1s was they consume less fuel with their 12-cylinder 645 engines, instead of the 16 cylinders in the Geeps. When the GP15-1s arrived in 2019, one of the ex-BN units and No. 400 departed.

Former Chicago & North Western GP15-1 No. 4413 became Northern Lines No. 422, while No. 421 is ex-St. Louis-San Francisco (Frisco) No. 122. The units were overhauled at Metro East Industries in East St. Louis, Ill., and include a “hot start” feature to minimize engine idling during the infamous Minnesota winters.

After its C&NW turn, No. 422 became Union Pacific 1544, then California Northern 102. It moved on to Locomotive Leasing Partners as No. 1513, wearing blue-and-white paint, then to GMTX, where it was renumbered 422 and was lettered and worked for Louis Dreyfus Commodities. It retains its C&NW-style nose bell.

While the railroad flirted with BN green with two of its elderly Geeps, it went all in with the GP15s. Both were repainted in Cascade Green by Mid-America Car in Kansas City, Mo., to salute the railroad



Ex-Belt Railway of Chicago GP10 No. 1703, built as a GP7 for Great Northern, powers a Northern Line ballast train on Sept. 14, 2006. This is one of the two former Belt Railway units the short line leased when it began operations; both are now gone.

that once operated NLR lines. “We thought, let’s get it right,” Gilbertson says. “They look great. Since it is a BN/BNSF spinoff, we thought we’d honor that heritage.”

In a unique turn, No. 421 is wearing Cascade Green for the second time. After BN merged Frisco into its system in 1980, the unit was repainted green and renumbered BN 1397. It became BNSF No. 1497, then was sold to GATX as No. 421, wearing blue and white before returning to green.

To handle traffic growth, NLR retained No. 1610. “In the wintertime, we do a lot of propane at Rockville, and I’ll put that old gal on, too, and work her a little bit,” says Chalich, the railroad president. It also serves as a backup when there is a 92-day test inspection on the GP15-1s.

Locomotive maintenance is contracted out to Minnesota-based contractor Independent Locomotive Service.

NORTHERN LINES OPERATIONS

Chalich, who has been with the railroad since startup, says NLR typically operates five days a week, with a crew coming at 7 a.m. (6 a.m. in summer) to work industries;

they usually work the St. Joseph Line first. In summer when rock trains are operating, another crew will go on duty at 8 a.m. Occasionally, rock trains operate on Saturdays.

Chalich describes the operation of the rock trains: “BNSF leaves its power on the trains, which can be anywhere from



Employees from Independent Locomotive Service attend to GP15-1 No. 422 at Northern Lines’ St. Cloud Yard. The company based in Bethel, Minn., about 50 miles from St. Cloud, has the contract to provide maintenance for the short line’s diesels.

40 cars to 100 cars, but typically they are 55 cars. We get on the power, take the train to Martin Marietta, where it is scaled [weighed] on the main track at 5 mph. Then we back it in; they have a north and south track at Martin Marietta. A conveyor belt comes over to the track and they will load about 40 tons in a car. Then they have two big buckets that add more rock. We just slowly keep moving. Typically, we can have a 55-car train back in the yard and air tested in 4½ to 5 hours.”

For interchange, BNSF operates a week-day local that makes a round trip from Northtown Yard in Minneapolis to the yard in St. Cloud. Northern Lines crews line up the BNSF cars, so the local can simply pull in, drop its cars, pick up the interchange, and head back to Northtown.

With its customer focus and expanding business, those Cascade Green GP15-1s will have plenty of work to do in the future. Chalich sums up Northern Lines’ outlook: “When we talk to the customers, we let them know we’re here for them, and that helps both of us out.” **I**