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Agency OKs broad study of freight train rerouting

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The U.S. Surface Transportation Board announced Friday it will study a wide range of safety and environmental concerns prompted by Canadian National Railway's plan to divert its freight traffic around Chicago and through outlying suburbs.

The board also said its environmental impact study would cover a period up to 2015, which is three years longer than Canadian National had wanted. The decision bolstered the hopes of suburban opponents of Canadian National's plans, though they had wanted the study to cover a period up to 2035.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning agreed the five-year period was preferable to Canadian National's timetable, but the agency had wanted a 10-year study, spokesman Tom Garritano said.

Canadian National said Friday it would need time to study the decision.

Among the issues to be included in the analysis will be the effect that a tripling or quadrupling of rail traffic would have on dozens of suburbs along the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railroad.

Canadian National needs the board's approval for its \$300 mil-

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lion purchase of EJ&E's 198 miles of tracks from Waukegan to Joliet to Northern Indiana. Canadian National plans to bypass Chicago's congested rail hub and speed freight movement across the country.

In its decision Friday, the board outlined 15 areas to be included in the final scope of its environmental impact study into the acquisition. The analysis will be conducted by the board's staff.

A crucial issue involves

mitigation, or ways to lessen the effect of increased train traffic on communities, by means such as constructing underpasses. This is a point of contention between the railway and many suburbs.

In a statement, the board's acting secretary, Anne Quinlan, said the board will consider the study's mitigation recommendation in deciding whether to grant Canadian National's proposal, or grant it with environmental conditions.

But, she said, "Voluntary mitigation and mutually acceptable negotiated agree-

ments can result in cost-sharing to allow completion of very costly measures, such as grade-separated crossings, which primarily benefit the community rather than the railroad, and thus are typically funded primarily by entities other than the railroad."

The study will analyze safety at grade crossings, hazardous materials transportation, the effects on existing and proposed Metra lines and Amtrak service, and energy and fuel use.

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