

BNSF Promises More Fertilizer Trains

JAMES MacPHERSON, Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — BNSF Railway Co. has promised to add more trains to ensure timely delivery of fertilizer for spring planting, Sen. John Hoeven said Monday.

The North Dakota Republican said BNSF Executive Chairman Matt Rose told him over the weekend that the railroad "will dedicate additional resources and crews to get fertilizer to North Dakota producers faster."

Mark Watne, president of the North Dakota Farmers Union, said the state's current fertilizer supplies aren't adequate and some producers are struggling to find product.

"If they can't be supplemented, there is a potential for shortages across the state and that's a big deal," said Watne, whose group has about 40,000 members. "Some co-ops have quit pre-selling fertilizer because they can't guarantee delivery."

North Dakota farmers each year use about 800,000 tons of nitrogen-based fertilizer to help increase production of wheat, corn and other crops, said Dave Franzen, a soil science specialist at North Dakota State University. Almost all fertilizer that comes to North Dakota is imported, he said.

Without sufficient fertilizer supplies, "a lot of people are going to be in trouble," Franzen said.

Increased crude oil and freight shipments largely have been blamed for causing the rail delays. BNSF has said that rail service has been backlogged because of bad winter weather.

Hoeven and BNSF said in statements that the railroad would dedicate trains specifically for fertilizer.

"BNSF understands the importance of ensuring the fluidity of the supply chain during this critical period," the company's statement said. "All of our operating teams are focused on and dedicated to providing the level of service our customers expect and we are committing the resources required to accomplish this effort."

BNSF is based in Fort Worth, Texas, but is part of Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Inc., based in Omaha, Neb. The railroad is the biggest player in the rich oil fields of Montana and North Dakota, hauling the bulk of the crude out of the region and the inbound freight that supports oil drilling.

Facing increased criticism for allegedly choosing oil shipments over agriculture, the

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railroad in February said it was adding 5,000 railcars, 125 temporary locomotives and 250 temporary workers in North Dakota to help clear the backlog of the state's grain shipments.

Watne, the Farmers Union president, said grain shipments were still a month behind schedule on Monday, adding to the costs for grain elevators and agricultural producers.

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