MAINE COAST/SAFE HANDLING

Note: In early October Maine Coast told MDOT that it was terminating its operating agreement on the Rockland branch (Brunswick to Rockland) and the Lower Road (Brunswick to Augusta). MDOT awarded interim operating rights to Safe Handling as of 4 December. This article describes the transition.

12 December, Brunswick-Thomaston. SAFE HANDLING MADE ITS FIRST RUN this day, according to Ford Reiche, president of Auburn-based Safe Handling. Under the legal name Safe Handling Rail Incorporated [reporting marks SRP for Safe Handling Rail Project], John Shute is managing the railroad.

He has very good credentials, Reiche said, with experience in both freight and passenger. Most recently he completed a start-up of the Flats Industrial Railroad in Ohio, and took the reins at SRP because he saw an opportunity with SHP and a less burdensome commute from his home in North Yarmouth. “He functions well at the sales and management level. He can both lead, and handle operations, in fact he’s on a locomotive this minute,” said Reiche.

The effort to get underway
Reiche said that Maine Coast declined to sell or lease any of its locomotives or maintenance-of-way equipment to Safe Handling. Shute then leased two GP-15 Dash 1s with former Conrail markings from Locomotive Leasing Partners (LLPX), which reached GRS’ Rigby Yard in South Portland 9 December.

The first run
With the locomotives, GRS brought the first train to Brunswick on 10 December, consisting of one flatcar of steel for Hardings (BIW), three black waste container cars for Maine Yankee, and a string of Pittsburgh and Shawmut coal hoppers for Dragon Cement.

Jim Jaffray of Dragon said the coal cars had reached his yard on 12 December. “We’re very pleased with Safe Handling, we have talked at length with John Shute.” The coal was held up in Pennsylvania, and constitutes the last shipment of the season. Dragon plans to conduct its rail-to-barge shipments over the winter. “We’ll be resuming getting inbound coal and iron by rail in the spring.”

What about east Augusta traffic?
According to Reiche, during the transition period from 4 December to this point, GRS has resumed serving its east Augusta customers. “Shute is finalizing arrangements with GRS as we speak, and we will take over as soon as possible. Guilford has been helpful and supportive throughout this process.”

Pine State, the only customer in west Augusta, received by truck during the transition and SHP is arranging to resume rail shipments.

The future for SRP
Reiche sounded a very upbeat note. “Our whole company received the ISO-9000 quality designation on 1 December.” In the brief marketing Shute and Reiche have done, “our hopes are confirmed that the circle of Safe Handling customers and contacts are showing interest in using the railroad.” {ANR&P discussions with Jaffray 13.Dec.00, with Reiche 14.Dec.00}

Last run of the Maine Coast
On 4 December, MC made its last run, bringing down all four engines, two ex-Long Island RR coaches, and an empty UP covered hopper. Upon arrival at the Brunswick Yard, the train was shoved into the yard track against some empty freight cars already there. Then the four engines were shut down, handbrakes set, some equipment removed (radios, shovels, etc.), and then drained of coolant (except for the 2002 which had anti-freeze). The ex-Maine Central ALCO S1 #958 is going to the Hobo Railroad in Lincoln, New Hampshire. The RS-11 #367 is the only engine owned outright by MC. The two M420w are leased [per one report, from Conrail]. The train’s brakeman, who planned to work for GRS, said because Guilford and Maine Coast had had a good working relationship, Guilford had welcomed former Maine Coast employees to come work for GRS. {Alan Seamans in NERAILS e-mail list}