

Submitter: Peter E. Fargo  
On Behalf Of: Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon  
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB5006

As a Baker City resident, I would like to bring to the Committee's attention a separate but related environmental justice concern: the impact of train horn noise on our communities. It is unrelated to climate change, of course, but it is one of many challenges, like smoke and heat, that accumulate to break down a community's health and resilience.

While La Grande successfully established a railroad Quiet Zone in 2019, another Eastern Oregon community, Baker City, has been pursuing a Quiet Zone since 2019 and has not been able to reach the finish line. In our community, as in hundreds of communities across the state, train horns routinely blast four times as they approach each public crossing. With six crossings in Baker City, at an average of 25 trains per day, our residents are exposed to hundreds of horn blasts every day.

The impact of train horns is severe. The noise level of a train horn is 110 decibels the horn itself — a level that is medically proven to harm human health. Even hundreds of yards away from train crossings, train horns are still loud enough to cause persistent sleep interruption for thousands of residents. This is also medically proven to harm human health.

The Union Pacific Railroad runs adjacent to my daughter's elementary school, South Baker Intermediate, where trains blast their horns directly onto the playground full of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders. Studies show that loud noises induce a stress response that impacts our kids' educational attainment. This is simply not acceptable.

Train horns are an injustice that impacts everyone — and they disproportionately impact lower income people who don't have the ability to move away from the noise. Baker City, and communities across Oregon, deserve better. However, we have been left on our own, with no resources or advocates at the state level, to help us work with Union Pacific Railroad and the Federal Railroad Administration.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon recommends that the Joint Committee fund a new program within the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to support communities seeking Quiet Zone status. We plan to follow up with a white paper to outline this program, including but not limited to: research, technical support, and Quiet Zone project funding. Further, communities need access to state-funded legal support to overcome unnecessary costs, delays, contracts, and other obstacles that some railroad companies are introducing into the Quiet Zone process.

Thank you for considering my testimony, and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations in more detail.

Very respectfully,

Peter Fargo  
Environmental Justice Coordinator  
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon