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Press Conference

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# Progress Is Made on World Rail Project

by Marcia Merry Baker

On Oct. 15, a news briefing was held at the site of the Arctic Energy Summit Technology Conference in Anchorage, Alaska, by representatives of the Interhemispheric Bering Strait Tunnel and Rail Group (IBSTRG) and RusHydro, the largest Russian hydropower company, on the Bering Strait Tunnel, reporting on “The Preliminary Results of Exploration of the Tunnel’s Prospective Route.” The four principal speakers, and translator, are shown in the photograph. IBSTRG president George Koumal led off the briefing, followed by Academician Yevgeni Velikhov, Alexander Sergeyev of RusHydro; Lev M. Shtilman, Energy Advisor to Gov. Roman Abramovich of the Chukotka Autonomous Region; and IBSTRG Treasurer Craig Burroughs.

**EIR** November 9, 2007



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*Speakers at the Oct. 15 press conference on the Bering Strait Tunnel and World Link rail system: Academician Yevgeni Velikhov, president of the Kurchatov Institute; Alexander J. Sergeyev, executive board member of RusHydro; George Koumal, president of IBSTRG; Lev M. Shtilman and John Tchoitsky, advisors to the Government of Chukotka; and Craig Burroughs, treasurer of IBSTRG.*

Velikhov stressed the role of nuclear power, as he did in his earlier Summit plenary address. He said that, if you look at all great Russian achievements over the past century and a half, they proceed by steps. Today, we need nuclear power as the start-up energy source for the industrial production and construction for the mega-projects. We can produce 70-MW plants, built on a “conveyer-belt” process, to support the actual construction. In the future, there can be moves to a “more permanent energy supply,” including geothermal and hydro, but, “in the beginning, nuclear power is very important.”

Shtilman spoke of the improvements to life on both sides of the Bering Strait (see interview). Burroughs estimated that the entire rail and tunnel program could be built for \$65 billion, with huge revenues to be expected from the new trade routes and development involved. This point was elaborated in response to a question from *Petroleum News*, about how much analysis had been done of the “payouts” to be expected. The rail corridors transit an area of huge resources.

The following is a paraphrase of the briefing by Koumal, and a verbatim transcript of the translation of the remarks by Sergeyev, both of whom, the following day, gave in-depth conference sessions on the Bering Strait Tunnel, and the World Link rail system, respectively. (Video of their presentations, and of the Oct. 15 press conference, will be posted soon on [www.arcticportal.org](http://www.arcticportal.org)).

### **A Modern ‘Northwest Passage’**

Koumal began by referring to a recent mention in a *New York Times* article, of the term “Northwest Passage,” saying that, “Twenty years ago, our organization started thinking about making a century-old dream of a Northwest Passage, a reality.

“But instead of thinking of a ship in the icy seas, we turned back to a history-proven, best long-distance, transport mode.... And we proposed to connect the North American continent with a railroad system to Europe, and Africa, with a tunnel under the narrow waters of the Bering Strait.”

Koumal reported that, “Yesterday, we visited the site of the Bering Strait tunnel. We were standing on the beach of the little village of Wales, on the Seward Peninsula. You can stretch your hand, and touch Mother Russia. When you are looking west, you are looking into Russia. I think it is a project which will open a treasure chest of the Arctic.”

He related that his group discussed the project with a number of people in the government that day. We discussed it with [Sen.] Lisa Murkowski [R-Ak.]; we told her about Wales. We spoke to [former Alaska] Gov. [Walter] Hickel. And we spoke to [Assistant] Secretary [Bureau of Economic, Energy and Business Affairs Daniel] Sullivan. We have been corresponding with the State Department for some time. And it was very refreshing to see him. “Finally, the U.S. State Department knows there is the Arctic!”

So we are very pleased with our visit to Wales, to those people who want to become part—they want to end their isolation. They want jobs, training, health care, and electric power. And our project means all those things to those people, and to everyone in the remote villages on both sides of the Bering Strait.

Many people think that tunnelling under the Bering Strait is really very difficult, but it is not difficult. The idea to build a tunnel under the Bering Strait is 150 years old. People in 1905 and 1906 thought that the whole project would be a cinch. It is 44 miles in the stretch. However, there are two islands, so the tunnelling would actually be easier than the tunnelling between England and France. The underwater distances are shorter. And above all, the geology in the Bering Strait is about 300% better.

The challenges are the railroads. There are 2,000 miles of railroad to be built on the North American continent, and there is pretty much the same distance of rail to be built on the other side. However, as I speak today, our Russian colleagues are already working on that.

They are building a railroad from Baikal-Amur Mainline to the north, to the city of Yakutsk, the major industrial center on the Lena River. From there, they have a plan to build a railroad to Magadan, a major mining center farther to the Northeast. And of course, they have plans for a line all the way up to the Chukotka Peninsula to the Bering Strait to North America.

So, ultimately, we can get on the train here in Anchorage, and sip champagne in Siberia, and go to Paris—a much more civilized way to travel than by air. As a *Time* magazine article said recently, everybody knows that the modern airliner manages to compress days or weeks of travel, into a few hours of “astonishing misery.”

Railroads are the miracle that provided us with the standard of living that we have today. And all that we have to do—we can *create an environment along the railroad track*, where the palm trees will grow. You can have “climate control.” And the Alaska seal will not know that there is a tunnel going under his sea. So it is totally an environmentally friendly way to travel.

So we should join the people on all continents. They are all the same, with the same desires and hopes and plans for the future. Whether here, or in Siberia, or in Timbuktu in Africa, we are all the same people. And we have to do something to enlarge the wealth of this planet. Because there are 6.5 billion people. When Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem, there were 300 million people. It took 1,800 years to reach 1 billion. But it took only 200 years to reach where we are today. We have to take care of the people.

We will need some energy to start it. Diesel power stations cannot be the basis for heavy construction. The U.S. Army, and the Army of Russia as well, have worked on mini-nuclear power plants. You can carry the plants on two trucks. You can generate enough power—

Velikhov interjected: “For such things, you need trucks!”

Koumal concluded, “Or you can put the generators on railroad cars. So that would be the initial way to supply the energy. However, the permanent solution would be sustainable hydro-power. Over 60% of the energy in eastern Russia can come from hydro-power. . . . Speaking of energy, I would rather have Academician Velikhov speak.”

### **Sergeyev: Russia Has Started on the Project!**

*Transcription of the remarks by Alexander Sergeyev:*

“I represent the Russian Hydroelectric firm—RusHydro. It is the second-largest hydro-company in the world, producing based on renewable resources. Today, we only produce electrical energy within Russia, but we’re very interested, and looking at assisting those countries that are interested in developing their renewable resources and energy potential. There is hydro potential in the United States and especially Alaska, that could get a big push.

“I’d like to thank Mr. Koumal for his statement about the Bering Strait, which we just returned from visiting yesterday.

“I would like to give you some news about our project. I’d like to announce that Russia has started building their part of this international transport system—World Link. While we’re standing here, the special machine is putting in the rails all the way to the city of Yakutsk. Our company is providing the hydroelectric energy for this project.

“On Oct. 19, we’re going to be providing 2,000 megawatts at our station. The Bureyskaya Hydroelectric Power station is opening.

“On the 6th of September, there was a meeting of the Russian government, where they adopted as a basis for, and supported the development of, railroads for Russia until 2030.

“Russia has looked at funding one-third of this project, or about \$20 billion. So there is now about \$50 billion of

financing left to be funded.

“There are 2,000 kilometers from British Columbia to the Seward Peninsula. There are also 2,000 km [on the Russian side] and the Tunnel, which is 150 km.

“My second piece of news is that this railroad, when it will be in operation, will be powered by, for the most part, hydroelectric power. And the construction of the Tunnel—we are having discussions already—is to use floating nuclear power plants.

“Another piece of news, is that there is a lot of hydro-potential that could be developed in Alaska. You know the Susitna River is a giant storer of electric energy. And if you build an electric power plant, that the U.S. Department of Energy has looked at already, the American part of the [World Link] railroad would have a source of energy that is environmentally friendly.

“I’d like to remind you that there are 200 years of diplomatic relations between Russia and the United States. You might know that Russia was one of the first countries that recognized the independence of the United States. We have a really good chance to be able to think about realizing this project together. Thank you.”

Koumal then added: “I would add that the Interhemispheric Bering Strait Railroad is Russian, United States, and Canadian. We will have a new board of directors, reflecting the efforts of the three nations. . . .”

## **FDR’s Post-War Plan: ‘Northward to Asia’**

by Marcia Merry Baker

Alexander Sergeyev, executive board member of RusHydro, in his “World Link” presentation on intercontinental rail corridors to the Arctic Energy Summit Technology Conference on Oct. 16, made a special point of showing a photograph of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Sergeyev stated, “Russians hold President Franklin Roosevelt in great esteem. He was the one who led the United States out of the Great Depression and led to victory in World War II.” Sergeyev cited the “great construction” projects of the FDR era, including rail and the Hoover Dam. “In 1942, FDR gave the Army Corps engineers the task to study the feasibility of a railroad to connect Alaska, through Canada, with the lower states. I read the report. But it sat on the shelf for almost 60 years. So Russia today is actually implementing the Roosevelt view that allowed the U.S. to come out of the Depression!”

In fact, the development of Alaska as part of the world rail land-bridge, represents the fulfillment in very specific terms, of the vision of FDR, and his Vice President Henry Wallace during the 1940s. While FDR and Wallace were forced to pur-