

Concessionaire takes on a tough assignment

Ferrocarril del Pacifico is restoring freight services on the run-down narrow-gauge link from the Pacific Ocean port of Buenaventura to the Colombian interior. **Murray Hughes** reports.

The route from the Pacific port of Buenaventura to the provinces of Valle, Cundinamarca and Antioquia in the western half of Colombia is an important freight corridor handling about one third of all the country's imports. Entailing a formidable climb from sea level to around 1800 m in the northern Andes, the 914 mm gauge railway from the port to the city of Cali and part of the route to Medellin was put out to concession in 1998. Three successive concessionaires took on the job of running the line, but each in turn was obliged to withdraw.

The concession was initially awarded to Corporación Red Ferrea del Pacifico, which was replaced by Tren de Occidente in 2001. Seven years later, the responsibility passed to Ferrocarril del Oeste, but since 2012 the concession has been in the hands of Ferrocarril del Pacifico. In October 2013, Tráficos subsidiary Impala Terminals Group, through its Fenwick Colombia subsidiary, became the majority shareholder in FDP, bringing in Belgian-registered Vecturis as operator to provide technical management services for the railway.

The original concession ran for 30

concessionaire as no financial support was available from the Colombian government. On the other hand, the contractor was not required to put up a fee when taking on the concession. Nor was there any form of tax relief available, while assets such as stations and warehouses were not the property of the concessionaire.

The current concession covers 498 route-km, but for the moment only the 155 km from Buenaventura to Yumbo is open to traffic. Rehabilitation is proposed for the 187 km from Yumbo to

Zarzal and the 43 km section from there to Cartago. The 111 km Cartago – La Felisa section also forms part of the concession, but the track here is in need of rehabilitation; this is currently being reviewed by national infrastructure organisation ANI, which oversees the FDP and other railway concessions. ANI also acts as a regulator, checking and controlling the quality of any rehabilitation work.

When Vecturis took on the task, there were only four operational locomotives and 70 usable wagons. The 131 staff



Above: The Buenaventura – Cali route climbs to a height of around 1800 m, placing heavy demands on FDP's motive power, including this U18 transferred by ANI last year.

Right: FDP trains have to contend with numerous sharp curves and grades as steep as 4-5% on the climb from Buenaventura

'The company's first step was to put in place a US\$32m investment programme'

of four regauged RS22CC locomotives of 2000 hp from Grindrod in South Africa. A tamping machine and a ballast regulator have also been acquired.

The investment plan goes hand in hand with a company restructuring programme that sets out contractual arrangements with ANI, cleans up debts and puts in place a range of organisational procedures. An essential part of this is a staff recruitment and training programme that should add 150 employees to the payroll this year. A driver training simulator is being obtained from Transurb Technirail of Belgium.

Traffic growth

Some progress is already evident. Whereas the line was handling just 10000 tonnes of freight a month last October, by June 2014 the tonnage had doubled. FDP has a target of 80000 tonnes a month for 2015, which it plans to attain partly by attracting new business.

At the moment the railway carries household goods and electronic equipment in containers, as well as cement, raw materials, imported steel bars and coils, imported cereals and export sugar. By 2015, FDP hopes to introduce a container service from Buenaventura to Medellin and Bogota, which would see containers switched to road at a terminal in Zarzal. In the longer term, it is hoping to add fertilisers, export coal and petroleum products to its cargo list, but

Below: When FDP took over the concession, only four locomotives were in working order. The target is to have 10 operational by 2016.

Below right: FDP has initiated a community programme which involves local people in the railway. It plans to increase the number of staff and invest in a driver training simulator.

this will depend on achieving profitability to support further investment and obtaining the necessary licences.

Among the problems that managers have to deal with is an unusual form of competition. This takes the form of private individuals driving motorcycle-powered trolleys fitted with rail wheels. As it has so far proved impossible to halt this illegal traffic, FDP is endeavouring to take some of the risk out of this exceptionally dangerous practice by fitting a radio-based warning system to the trolleys. This activates a flashing light to alert the trolley driver to an approaching train. As the line has numerous 70 m radius curves, trolley operators would otherwise have little or no warning at all. ■



were not able to initiate much activity as no financial resources were available.

The company's first step was to put in place a US\$32m investment programme with the objective of returning the railway to normal operations during 2014. A follow-up programme envisaged for 2015-16 could see a further US\$40m or more invested in the railway. These funds will go partly towards track upgrading and partly towards the acquisition of more rolling stock so that 10 locomotives and 200 wagons are available by 2016. Two General Electric U18 locomotives were transferred from the FENOCO concession by ANI, along with 60 container flat wagons, and FDP has taken delivery



10

LOCOMOTIVES TO BE AVAILABLE ON FDP BY 2016