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A sustainable transport system requires that expansion of the railways is prioritised

In order for the transport sector to become environmentally sustainable, a sharp increase in rail traffic is required. But the railways can also be made even more environment-friendly than at present. These assertions were made at the international conference *Is Rail on Track?* in Eskilstuna, Sweden, 25-26th October. "Business as usual" is no longer an option, says Joke Waller-Hunter, the OECD's Environment Director.

For further information:

Lars B Johansson
Environmental Director
+46 70 762 31 91

Ola Nilsson
Press Manager
+46 70 698 49 71

Karin Rosander
Information Director
+46 70 724 55 60

**Banverkets's press
office:**
+46 243 44 55 99

**Information on
Banverket and pictures
from the conference:**
www.banverket.se

The transport sector is the largest source of carbon dioxide emissions, which are threatening to change the world's climate. In the EU, traffic emissions increased by 50 per cent in the 1990s. Cars, lorries and planes account for by far the largest emissions.

"We need to prioritise expansion of the railways in planning and decision-making in all countries," said Sweden's Minister for the Environment, Kjell Larsson, who gusted at the conference on Thursday afternoon.

Is Rail on Track? Attracted some 70 participants from Europe, north America and Japan to the city Eskilstuna. The conference is part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's project which aims to stimulate debate and research concerning the development of an environmentally sustainable transport system.

The final document states that a greater proportion of transport by rail creates the possibility for people to live a good life within the framework of what the environment can tolerate. At present, however, there are several obstacles to increased rail traffic. Many countries subsidise road transport by not paying fully for environmental impairments and accidents. This could be remedied by introduction of a kilometre charge for heavy-duty lorries. The conference noted that knowledge concerning the environmental advantages of railways is also often low.

The environmental advantages of the railways can be even greater if trains are made more environment-friendly. Simple measures such as another type of brakes can reduce train noise by 20 decibels, Axel Friedrich from the Federal Environment Agency in Berlin explained.

"The total emissions of carbon dioxide can be reduced and the credibility of the train as an environmental alternative will increase if trains are run on Eco-labelled electricity from renewable sources. This is already happening in Sweden," says Banverket's environmental director, Professor Lars B Johansson.

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