

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2003)
Heft: [2]

Artikel: An interview with Benedikt Weibel
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855141>

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AN INTERVIEW WITH BENEDIKT WEIBEL

I HAVE OFTEN MENTIONED THE EXCELLENT ON-LINE NEWS SERVICE PROVIDED IN ENGLISH BY SUISSE RADIO INTERNATIONAL. THE SITE IS KNOWN AS *SWISSINFO* AND CAN BE FOUND AT: <WWW.SWISSINFO.CH>. THIS ARTICLE IS STRAIGHT FROM THE SITE AND I AM GRATEFUL FOR THEIR PERMISSION TO USE IT WHICH IS DULY ACKNOWLEDGED

The Swiss Federal Railways has recorded a loss for the first time since it became a public limited company in 1999. *swissinfo* spoke to SBB President Benedikt Weibel to find out how the company is coping amid the economic downturn.

swissinfo: You are having to set aside provisions to cover the Federal Railways pensions commitments, and this will continue for years to come. How does this affect your company?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: I think we will continue to make losses for the next few years. We have to make annual provisions of SFr145million for the next 14 years, which will have a negative impact on our equities.

swissinfo: Goods traffic was liberalised in Switzerland in 1999. Are you planning to privatise passenger services as well?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: I think privatising passenger traffic would be more difficult. With goods traffic, a licensed company can simply use our railway system by paying a fee.

I don't think it will be possible for a private company to just serve a certain line. Passenger traffic depends more on the whole system and connections, which is why the European Union wants regional lines to be advertised for bids. The EU is currently discussing long-distance rail traffic, which is quite a difficult process as all the networks have different structures.

swissinfo: Goods traffic is constantly increasing in Europe. But so far we have failed to transfer the lion's share of freight to the railways. Why?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: It is simply due to the fact that we have not been able to deliver top quality. If the customers receive the goods on time

they are happy, but at the moment we are still faced with too many delays.

swissinfo: How about the goods traffic that is crossing the Alps?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: We need to solve the problems that are currently occurring on our southern borders. The quality is not good enough - the waiting times at the borders are too long and there are too many delays. If we cannot solve this problem, things will never get better. We are currently setting up a company based in northern Italy. This will allow us to manage the whole transport ourselves. Swiss Rail Cargo will be launched on December 13, 2003.

swissinfo: The problems in Italy are mainly due to the country's poor infrastructure. How are you going to deal with this?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: Well, that is right and we cannot do anything about that apart from hope that our Italian colleagues will act professionally.

The Monte-Olimpino tunnel is due to open again soon. It has been closed since last November due to flooding. The closure has cost the Swiss Federal Railways SFr5 million a month.

It is also difficult to understand why Switzerland is investing millions of francs in the construction of new tunnels through the Alps, while the Italian border town of Luino is still operating their railway points by hand! I would call this an anachronism.

swissinfo: Are there any disadvantages for Switzerland for not being a member of the EU?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: Not at all. We have a good reputation and Brussels has repeatedly praised us for our proficiency and efficiency.

swissinfo: Passenger traffic is increasing rapidly. Do you think it will have reached its peak soon?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: Passenger traffic will continue to increase. One of the reasons for this trend is that rail traffic is getting faster than car traffic. On December 12, 2004, we will launch the Rail 2000 project, which features shorter journey times, better connections and more comfortable trains.

swissinfo: The European safety system ERTMS will also be introduced in December 2004. Is Switzerland a key player in this project?

BENEDIKT WEIBEL: Yes, unfortunately. On the Olten-Lucerne line we are already running a pilot project, which has really tested our customers' patience and we apologise for that. It is never desirable to be a guinea pig for a new project.

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