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The line to Les Brenets

Bryan Stone



This curious little metre-gauge railway is part of the Chemins de fer des Montagnes Neuchâteloises (CMN) now marketed as 'transN'. It was built in 1890; is just 4.1km long (of which 1km is in tunnel); lies mostly above 900m altitude, has a grade over most of its length of 30% (1:33); and carries on average 450 passenger journeys/day on its 7-minute trip. It only covers some 30% of its costs, and hovers at the very edge of retaining its national subsidy. The balance sheet is helped due to the value of the rolling stock being fully written-off. Its two operating 44-seat railcars (BDe4/4 Nos.3 & 5) were part of a batch of four built in Italy by Reggiane, for the line's electrification at 1500V dc in 1950. Although 66 years old fortunately they still function as intended as any requirement to fund new railcars would truly break-the-bank and would probably precipitate closure, so the long-term future for the line is difficult. Although Le Locle is a busy location, the catchment area, hard up against the French frontier, is thinly populated. However hope is expressed that a better service could encourage new housing at Les Brenets. The railway is however physically remote from the nearest metre-gauge lines at La Chaux-de-Fonds - the other CMN 1500 V dc operation that runs to Les Ponts-

de-Martel and the CJ. Neither Ponts de Martel nor Les Brenets are hives of activity, as on a cold winter day both may seem like the end of the world! In summer Les Brenets has a modest tourism potential, with a pretty lake and the falls of the River Doubs, but it is very remote from anywhere. However, a surprising proposal has just appeared, that the line should be converted to standard gauge, re-electrified, and be integrated into SBB service at Le Locle, presumably with the hourly local service from La Chaux-de-Fonds being extended to Les Brenets. This would mean heavy work in the tunnels and at stations, but forecasts indicate passenger figures could double (although 1,000/day is still not dramatic) and some long-term economic benefits may be achieved in this remote area. Canton Neuchâtel has financial problems and is not interested, but encouraging regional development through interconnected transport services may be a justification. Some changes will be inevitable, so it is suggested that the line should be visited before these take place. 

TOP: The train waits at Les Brenets for passengers returning to Le Locle.

INSET LEFT: The imposing station building at Les Brenets.

INSET RIGHT: The train from Le Locle exits the tunnel on its approach to Les Brenets.

Photos: Bremgarten

A PLATFORM'S HIGH POINT

Mervyn Prichard's February 2016 photograph shows Platform 809 - the bay on the SW side of the station at Bellinzona (TI). Is this the highest numbered platform in Switzerland, or Europe, or the World? 

