DB and Eurostar line up for race to Britain

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Grube wants ICE to London by 2012â€ˆ

GERMAN RAIL (DB) will launch direct services from London to Cologne, Frankfurt, and Amsterdam ideally in 2012 or at the latest in 2013, CEO Dr Rüdiger Grube announced on October 19 during the first visit of an ICE3 high-speed train to London St Pancras.

DB will be the first new passenger operator to run services through the Channel Tunnel since it opened in 1994, ending Eurostar’s monopoly on international services to and from London.

DB will operate the new services using class 407 ICE3s from the fleet of 15 trains already on order from Siemens at a cost of about €500 million. The first train should be completed this month to enable certification to start in March 2011 in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France. Certification for operation to Britain will include an emergency evacuation test in the Channel Tunnel.

DB will run three trains a day from London using two sets in multiple. The trains will divide in Brussels with one set going to Rotterdam and Amsterdam and the other to Cologne and Frankfurt. Journey times from London will be three hours to Rotterdam, under four hours to Amsterdam and Cologne, and five hours to Frankfurt. “From city centre to centre, these times can easily compete with air travel,” he says.

Grube also called for the support of the infrastructure managers in all four countries to ensure DB obtains attractive paths and suitable passenger handling facilities in Belgium and the Netherlands. “We are sure to need political support - no doubt about it - if we are to succeed in doing so,” Grube observed.

Eurotunnel hails successful ICE tests

THE CEO of Eurotunnel, Mr Jacques Gounon, says the evacuation trials conducted in the Channel Tunnel during the weekend of October 16-17 with two ICE trains belonging to German Rail (DB) "were more successful than we expected."

Two trials to evacuate 300 people from the trains were conducted. The more complicated evacuation involving people moving from one train to the other was completed in 20 minutes, while evacuation through the doors to the cross passages, which Gounon describes as the "more obvious way to evacuate a train," took just 15 minutes. The requirement is to evacuate a train within 90 minutes.

Gounon says the trials were witnessed by independent observers from the Channel Tunnel Intergovernmental Commission (ICG), High Speed 1, and Eurostar. "We have been working with DB for several months to understand their needs and to acquaint them with the constraints of operating in the Channel Tunnel," he explains.

Gounon points out that the fastest time to evacuate a Eurostar class 373 train with about 700 passengers on board during a real emergency last December was 35 minutes.

"We have done all the tests with ICE that are needed for us and the IGC," he says. "We are now writing the final analysis of the tests and will report back to the IGC by the end of the year."

Gounon says trains must be able to withstand a fire for 30 minutes in order to exit the tunnel. "DB says it will have no problem meeting that requirement with ICE," he says. DB confirms that each set of traction equipment will have fire suppression systems, and the trains will be fitted with additional inter-car doors.

Eurotunnel will complete the construction of two 800m-long safety platforms in each running tunnel by the end of 2011. These will have fire suppression equipment and will aid train evacuations.

Eurostar contract riles French

AS the battle to run open-access services through the Channel Tunnel heats up, Eurostar has signalled its intentions by announcing a £700 million order for 10 new high-speed trains from Siemens, a major overhaul of its existing fleet, and a pledge to encourage more passengers to choose high-speed rail for journeys between Britain and mainland Europe.

Financed privately through a combination of its own cash and loans, Eurostar intends to use its new rolling stock from 2014. Although the operator remains tight-lipped on the exact routes it intends to serve, it says that it is currently "exploring" potential connections from London to Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Lyon and Marseille, and Geneva.

However, news of the deal with Siemens, which overcame Alstom's AGV in the battle for the contract, sent shockwaves across the channel. What was supposed to be a celebratory unveiling of Eurostar's e320, a development of Siemens' Velaro D, in London on October 7, was soon overshadowed by the reaction from the French government in a remarkable press statement released the same afternoon.

Mr Jean-Louis Borloo, minister of state for ecology, energy, sustainable development, and marine affairs, and Mr Dominique Bussereau, minister of state for transport, expressed their "amazement" at what they described as a disregard of the applicable safety rules in the call for tender and the subsequent selection of Velaro by Eurostar.

The e320 has a top speed of 320km/h, and capacity for more than 900 passengers, 20% more than Eurostar's current class 373 trains that were delivered between 1993 and 1996, and will be refurbished between 2012 and 2014 by Pininfarina, Italy.

With length currently a strict safety requirement to allow passengers to evacuate through the tunnel's emergency exits that are situated at 375m intervals, e320 is 400m long, the same length as the class 373, which operate the existing services from London to Paris and Brussels.

Despite Siemens' and Eurostar's insistence that e320 meets the strict safety standards, the French ministers expressed their objections to the train's distributed traction system.

Early next year, the Channel Tunnel Intergovernmental Commission (ICG) is expected to approve new safety rules for operating in the Channel Tunnel concerning distributed traction and train length.

Citing the tunnel's three fires in 1995, 2006 and 2008, the ministers nevertheless argue that these events highlight the importance of the tunnel's safety rules.

"The three fires that have broken out since it opened... are a reminder that no deterioration of the safety level is conceivable," the ministers said in the statement. "In this framework, Eurostar must adapt its call for tenders to comply with the current safety rules."

Alstom has also weighed in on the debate saying that the tunnel's safety standards "do not permit the use of the trains that Eurostar states it has purchased."

And on October 14 Bussereau went further. He told French television that Eurostar's Siemens contract is "null and void" saying that as well as presenting safety risks in the event of a fire, the Siemens trains are not long enough.

"Since the beginning we have told the management of Eurotunnel, which manages the tunnel, and Eurostar, which operates it... that trains other than Alstom trains cannot be used," he said.

Eurostar says it will "proceed as planned," while new CEO Mr Nicolas Petrovic insisted during the unveiling that e320 trains will meet the safety regulations.

He pointed out that by offering AGV, Alstom also proposed the use of distributed traction in the tunnel and that Eurostar would be willing to validate the operation of distributed power trains.

"If the French part of the commission has some fears we are obviously willing to conduct all the necessary studies," he said.

Certainly if the open-access era is supposed to promote competition among operators, Eurostar's rolling stock tenders should be competitive. As Petrovic pointed out during the October 7 press conference: "It was a very competitive tender and in the end Siemens made the best offer. That is why we selected their train."

Yet with German Rail (DB) stepping up its efforts to compete with Eurostar by running 200m-long trains in pairs through the tunnel, and the French government seemingly willing to dig its heels in to support national interests, the safety debate is likely to remain a critical talking point over the months ahead.