



Abseilers keep the network in trim

Network Rail called in 10 specialist abseilers to help complete a £450,000 project to repair the embankment on the Manchester to Preston line, which is 35 metres high with a steep slope of 55 degrees.

The project to strengthen the cutting slope at Chorley began in February following an assessment in spring 2004, which concluded the slope should be strengthened due to its steep sides and close proximity to Chorley tunnel.

Gary Openshaw, Network Rail's general manager for Preston, said: "This essential work is necessary to ensure the safe operation of this busy line. And we are pleased that it has been carried out without affecting train services."

A "soil nailing" scheme was chosen, and the specialist abseilers have been installing the 100 concrete "pins" that will hold the cutting stable. The project was completed in May.

Another £2million project – to stabilise another railway cutting south of Manchester with about

2,000 soil nails – was due for completion in June. The work took place at Preston Brook on the Crewe to Warrington line.

It is good to see work like this being undertaken, as in the past too much essential maintenance was shelved because it was too expensive.

But in 2004-05 Network Rail underspent its budget by £1billion – one seventh of the total.

Rail regulator Chris Bolt warned that this could store up problems for the future.

Most of the shortfall in 2004-5 was accounted for by lack of expenditure on projects such as track renewal and signal updating.

Mr Bolt said: "There is no question of signalling installations being unsafe but if signals are not renewed in appropriate time, that will start to have an impact on performance."

Mr Bolt was speaking as the Office of the Rail Regulator published comments on Network Rail's performance which commended its efforts in reducing delays and



Chorley cutting, with abseilers at work

Picture: Network Rail

achieving other targets. He said: "Reduced delays are good news for passengers, and there are encouraging signs that Network Rail and train operators are set to make further improvements this year."

But the not-for-profit company needed "to demonstrate more clearly that its plans will deliver all the performance and capacity improvements for which it is funded". He also criticised NR's plans for 2005. He said: "I think there are some weaknesses in Network Rail's business plan." NR was 66 miles

behind its target of 1,163 miles of track repair, while its shortfall in signal renewals was £170million.

He warned if there were "significant failures" the ORR could take out an enforcement order.

Railfuture members might ask what their favourite rail project would be if there was £1billion to spare. A new line can cost around £20million a mile (from a basic £10million a mile to £330million a mile for tunnelling) so the money could have built 50 miles of new railway.