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COMMENTARY: Coal deals Oregon a bad hand

Don't buy into Big Coal's arguments for running trains slowly through Eugene and on to Coos Bay for export

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For The Register-Guard

“A slow boat to China” was a term once used by poker players to describe a person who lost steadily and handsomely. Alternately, reflecting yesterday’s prejudices, it refers to an agonizingly slow journey to a questionable destination. Both phrases are fitting descriptions for the proposal to allow open coal trains to crawl through Eugene at 10 mph creating one massive traffic jam all the way from the Columbia Gorge to the Oregon Coast.

The plan is to load the coal from the Port of Coos Bay onto very slow boats to China — as well as Korea and India. When poisoning people, Big Coal doesn’t discriminate.

Bringing coal trains to Eugene is a gamble, and the losers are all of us.

Picture sooty, noisy coal trains clanking through our neighborhoods. Let’s start with coal dust from at least four trains a day pulling up to 150 open cars each. Great for the lungs, Tracktown.

Let’s add diesel grime, and toxic heavy metals from the four locomotives it takes to pull those long trains. Lung disease, like miner’s black lung, doesn’t happen overnight.

And let’s encourage foreign coal-buyers to pump more carbon into the atmosphere because the world is not nearly hot enough yet.

Oh, and let’s ignore the recent fatal coal train derailments in Maryland and Illinois. Slow doesn’t mean safe.

Coal has become a game of high-stakes poker that we can’t afford to lose. Let’s play a hand and see why.

The fake think: In the fake think, the poker player wants to confuse opponents by communicating misleading information. The coal industry’s classic fake think is to distract us from thinking about a secure economic future in clean energy by focusing attention on 19th century jobs.

But Business Oregon, the state's economic development agency, reports that "Oregon is one of the nation's leading clean energy economies and is also poised for significant (job) growth." Business Oregon references 1,482 new jobs at three solar panel manufacturing plants in Oregon which should pay an annual wage of \$51,000.

Compare that to the 165 jobs that would be generated from exporting millions of tons of coal from the Port of Coos Bay.

Slow roller: In poker, a slow roller takes an inordinate amount of time to make a play, like a coal train rattling through Eugene. A single coal train stretches over a mile and a half of track.

Heading west from Eugene's rail yard, the track is a tight horseshoe curve that wraps closely around three sides of Eugene's Public Works building near the Chambers Street overpass. As the train comes out of the curve, it closely parallels the length of the Eugene Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services property. Clouds of coal dust and the steady screeching of cars rounding the curve would doubtless improve the working conditions for city employees, firefighters and emergency responders — not to mention nearby residents and businesses.

According to the "Handbook of Railway Vehicle Dynamics," one of the most common reasons for a derailment is a heavy train on a curve with a tight radius. Rail companies also report that coal dust accumulating on the tracks tends to make them dangerously susceptible to derailments.

Not to worry. The CEOs of Big Coal companies don't live near railroad tracks.

Bumhunter: A bumhunter is the type of poker player who spends his time seeking out weak players. Going after economically depressed towns is Big Coal's way of bumhunting, and the Port of Coos Bay is a good example.

The port recently sent a letter to the Eugene City Council demanding that it support the coal train plan.

Yet in the same letter the port admitted that "the Coos Bay rail line is a very challenging piece of infrastructure to maintain ... comprised of 135 miles of track that passes through nine tunnels and over 150 bridges and water crossings."

The port's own studies estimated the track needs up to \$105 million in upgrades and repairs. And if an aging trestle or sharp curve results in the decimation the Siuslaw watershed's salmon fisheries and recreational sites, well, remember to be grateful for those 165 jobs.

Dead money: That's coal in a nutshell. It's the 21st century, and the planet is melting. Coal is a 19th century pollutant. When your hand is dead, it's time to stop trying to influence the betting.

Coal declined from nearly 50 percent of the U.S. power mix in early 2011 to a new low point of 34 percent in March 2012. That means giant mining companies such as Kinder Morgan, Peabody Coal and Arch Coal need communities like Coos Bay to ante up and protect them from environmental and economic scrutiny. Enough.

In a last ditch effort, Big Coal companies have launched a massive public relations campaign with this message: “Communities have the power to make a difference. . . . Electricity producers spanning the nation . . . (are) filing a lawsuit against the Environmental Protection Agency for exceeding its authority. You can help.”

Communities such as Eugene do indeed have the power to make a difference. As do the Washington state communities of Seattle, Spokane, Edmonds, Marysville and Camas City, whose city councils have already passed resolutions opposing coal trains.

We are counting on the Eugene City Council to remember what century we inhabit, and to place its bets on a healthy and clean energy future.

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