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The environmental group Beyond Toxics stages a march and rally Monday to protest coal train shipments through Eugene. The group walked to the Eugene Public Library to attend a meeting of the City Council and regional leaders concerning the possible transport of coal through the area.

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Debate over Eugene coal train pits jobs against environment

The Associated Press /

Published Oct 10, 2012 at 05:00AM / Updated Dec 13, 2013 at 04:37PM

EUGENE — Job creation and environmental concerns have taken center stage in the debate over coal trains traveling through Eugene.

A couple of dozen coal-train protesters on Monday evening marched to the downtown library, where the City Council heard testimony on a resolution against shipping coal through a Coos Bay terminal to Asia.

A number of people spoke in favor of the measure, expressing concerns about coal dust and climate change. But the council also heard from supporters, who said a \$250 million coal terminal would bring needed jobs.

It's unclear if Eugene would have authority to prevent coal shipments, The Register-Guard reported. The council votes in two weeks on the resolution, which would direct the city attorney to research whether health and safety laws could be used to block coal trains.

The Surface Transportation Board, the federal agency that regulates railroads, has said state and local governments cannot enact laws that would "significantly interfere with railroad operations, such as prohibiting the movement of trains on an existing rail line."

Councilman Alan Zelenka introduced the resolution, saying a comprehensive environmental review should be done on the export of coal that would arrive from Montana and Wyoming. Gov. John Kitzhaber also has called for such a review.

Coal export terminal supporters — Port of Coos Bay Chief Executive David Koch and Reedsport Mayor Keith Tymchuk — told councilors the export terminal would provide jobs to coastal communities that have been economically depressed since the timber industry downturn of the 1980s.

Moreover, the project would help the port improve a rail line between Eugene and Coos Bay that needs \$90 million in repairs and upgrades to remain operational.

"The only choice that we have is to either pursue private investment in the rail line or to, instead, watch it deteriorate until we are forced to abandon it," Koch said. "For the port and the communities served by the Coos Bay Rail Link, that is no choice at all."

Opponents invited to speak — Ross Macfarlane of Climate Solutions and Andy Harris of Physicians for Social Responsibility — discussed concerns ranging from climate change to the possible health effects from coal dust blowing off train cars.

The 150 million tons of coal burned in Asia would produce the same amount of greenhouse gas emissions each year as the emissions from all vehicle use in the western United States, Macfarlane said.

Harris added the issue should not be framed as jobs vs. the environment: "All of us support job growth, but not at the expense of the high quality of life, which we value so highly in Oregon."

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