



UO's Climate Justice League wants to stop coal trains from coming through Eugene. Photo by Trask Bedortha

# Coal Train

## Fossil fuels make tracks through Oregon

By Camilla Mortensen

Coal doesn't just burn hot, it burns dirty — it's pretty much dirt that burns — and like most hot things, it just might burn you.

No active commercial coal mines remain in Oregon, and the state plans to phase out coal from the Boardman coal-burning power plant in the Columbia Gorge by 2020. But if you thought coal wasn't a concern for Oregonians, think again. Oregon is pretty dependent on coal — almost 40 percent of the state's electricity comes from coal-burning power plants — and now Big Coal has plans to drive massive open trainloads of the grimy fossil fuel right through Eugene.

Coos Bay was once home to a coal mine and shipment of coal was a major part of its economy — almost one hundred years ago. But coal might be making a comeback in Coos Bay, and if it does, it will affect all of Lane County.

"I don't think people were prepared for it," says Grace Pettygrove, a Eugene activist who is organizing a coalition to fight the coal trains. She adds, "I think the Coos Bay proposal caught people off guard."

In October 2011, the Oregon International Port of Coos Bay signed an exclusive negotiating agreement with an anonymous company interested in shipping coal from the port. The code name for the coal export proposal is "Project Mainstay," and it calls for dredging the bay to deepen it, building a new terminal and shipping out of the port 6 to 10 million metric tons of coal a year. Estimates put that at one or two trains a day with 15,000 tons of coal — about 110 to 130 cars carrying 120 tons of coal each — coming from mines in Wyoming and Montana. Project Mainstay also means Eugene might see trains more than one

mile long coming through town with huge amounts of coal dust blowing from the cars. A Sightline Institute investigation into coal found that “500 pounds to a ton of coal can escape from a single loaded car,” according to calculations by the BNSF railroad.

Opponents point to multiple health issues including coal dust, diesel fumes blowing along the rail route, toxic pollution the coal burning in Asia will blow back to Oregon, contributions to climate change and a host of other problems that transporting coal will bring to local communities.

## Coal Complex

“The way to think about coal generally is not just a coal mine or a coal-fired power plant or a transmission line or a rail line or an export plan,” says Erik Schlenker-Goodrich director of Western Environmental Law Center’s Climate & Energy program. “The way to really think about this is that you have this pretty massive coal complex that stretches across the landscape.”

The whole coal complex starts with mining, but it stretches from the mine to rail lines to power plants to exports and so on. “It’s a massive supply chain and at every single stage there are impacts from coal,” he says.

According to Schlenker-Goodrich, in addition to the dust from the trains, those impacts include water and air quality issues at the mines and at the power plants from the arsenic, mercury and lead that are byproducts of mining and coal burning. “Coal combustion waste can be very toxic,” he says. “The chemicals and compounds can be detrimental to human health and water quality and aquatic species.”

When the Environmental Protection Agency released its new emissions standards for mercury and other toxic substances from coal-burning power plants last December, the agency said the new standards “will prevent as many as 11,000 premature deaths and 4,700 heart attacks a year.”

But with proposed Northwest exports sending coal to Asia, “we are sort of kicking ourselves twice over,” according to activist and filmmaker Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky, who recently completed a film project with Balance Media documenting the coal export issue. “We’re shipping it overseas only to have it blow back here.”

A fifth of the mercury pollution in waterways in the Pacific Northwest comes from abroad, Laura Stevens of the Sierra Club’s Beyond Coal campaign says. “Climate change pollution, no matter where it’s burned, affects us.”

Zimmer-Stucky says the federal government recently opened up more public land for coal mining in the West, despite the lack of need for it in the U.S. where many plants are turning away from the fossil fuel. She says that coal will be exported via cheap rail and then shipped overseas for a huge profit margin for the coal companies.

Schlenker-Goodrich says, “The way to think about the way electricity in the U.S. works at this time is that it relies on huge centralized power plants typically in rural areas.” He says the plants create regional haze and smog.

Even with Boardman moving away from coal (though considering natural gas, another fossil fuel, as well as biofuel-burning options) Oregon is still coal-dependent. “Turn on a light bulb in Eugene and it could be from power produced in Montana,” Schlenker-Goodrich says.

According to the Oregon Department of Energy, 37 percent of the electricity used in Oregon comes from coal, some from Boardman and some from out-of-state power plants such as Montana’s massive Colstrip plant. Recently released EPA data on power plants says Colstrip was the eighth biggest producer of greenhouse gas emissions in 2010, sending out 17,120,416 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent. In other words, a light bulb turned on in Eugene might be creating greenhouse gases in Montana, as well as poisoning the wells and lungs of the communities near the plant.

Joe Harwood of the Eugene Water and Electric Board says EWEB gets some of its power from BPA (Bonneville Power Administration), and that “coal makes up makes up 6 percent of EWEB’s power resource portfolio.” He adds, “EWEB and every other utility in the Northwest that receives BPA power would thus have some coal in their resource mix.”

According to EWEB's electric resource portfolio, the utility gets 52 percent of its electricity from BPA, and Harwood says 76 percent of EWEB's power resources come from hydropower. So Eugene isn't using much coal, though it could have tons of coal coming through town.

"There is a lot of pressure on these aging coal-fired power plants and the economics are changing very rapidly," Schlenker-Goodrich says. In addition to many of the older power plants such as Boardman being shut down, new proposals for coal-burning plants are being shelved, and "you have the coal mines saying 'Well we still want to mine this coal and sell it somewhere,'" he says.

That somewhere is Asia, and if the Coos Bay coal export terminal goes through, Oregon will be the route that gets it there.



## Train in vain

Boardman burns 3 to 5 million tons of coal per year, according to Stevens. "Compare that to how much coal they want to export and it's scary," she says.

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The Coos Bay proposal calls for the exporting of 6 to 10 million tons a year. That's bad enough for Eugene, but Stevens points out that, while another coal export proposal in Longview, Wash., was claiming it would export 5 million tons a year, it was revealed that coal giant Ambre Energy, through its subsidiary Millennium Bulk Terminals, secretly planned to export 20 to 60 million tons of coal a year from the proposed terminal, with at least 20 coal trains a day, moving slowly, holding up traffic, spewing diesel and coal dust, according to Stevens. She says the heavy weight of coal trains means they use a high amount of diesel.

There are five other proposed Northwest coal terminals in addition to Longview. Terminals have been proposed in Bellingham and Grays Harbor in Washington, and in Oregon there are proposals for terminals at ports in St. Helens and Boardman and, of course, Coos Bay.

The Boardman proposal, like Longview, is through Australian coal giant Ambre Energy. In addition to Ambre, fellow coal mega-corps Arch Coal (which owns Millennium with Ambre), Peabody Coal and Cloud Peak Energy are working to export coal, or already do, mainly from the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming. Currently that coal is exported through three terminals in Canada. Powder River Basin coal is in demand for its low sulfur content. Climate change activist Bill McKibben has called the basin "one of earth's great carbon bombs."

Peabody reportedly has entered into a large coal export contract with the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal project north of Bellingham. Just who has entered into the coal contract with Coos Bay remains unknown, thanks to the nondisclosure agreement. Martin Callery, chief commercial officer for the Port of Coos Bay, says such agreements are common in the transportation industry, from rail to marine to trucking. Because there's a lot of competition, the companies don't want their competitors to know what they're planning, Callery says.

"I don't think people realized it was going to come this far south," says Eugene activist Pettygrove. "We thought that the port's not deep enough, and the rail link was not up until this year. I really think that them fixing the rail link was done to prepare for this project."

Coal opponents speculate that the companies looking to open up terminals in Oregon are the same ones working on the Washington proposals — Arch, Ambre and Peabody — and are hedging their bets in case those terminals don't pan out. Cloud Peak Energy, a top exporter of coal through Canada, has several subsidiaries in Oregon: Kennecott Coal Sales, Northern Coal Transportation, Prospect Land and Development and Western Minerals.

Callery says that within the next 90 to 120 days, the Port of Coos Bay will enter into a property-purchase option agreement with "Project Mainstay," at which point the coal company's name could become known. The port and "Project Mainstay" are currently in the middle of six months of "due diligence" on the project, he says, which includes everything from looking at port capacity to rail-line capacity. The port also owns the rail line, called the Coos Bay Rail Link (CBRL).

Callery says a "dictating factor" in how much coal would be exported from Coos Bay is the "volume of bulk commodity via the rail system" or, in other words, how many unit trains (that travel from start to finish as one unit) the CBRL can handle. There is no legal limit on how long a freight train can be in the U.S.; they are limited only by their weight and what can pull them. Coal trains often have four diesel-spewing locomotives, two at each end of the train.

Project Mainstay is currently doing a rail capacity study, Callery says. He says the port didn't choose the largest project, it chose what it considered the best one. Another proposal, "Project Glory," which the port commission didn't choose, called to export 26 million metric tons of coal.

Callery says coal isn't the only commodity Project Mainstay is considering. It would also transport iron ore and mineral products. "There would be a significant number of jobs" at the terminal, the rail carrier and in the maritime industry, Callery says. The port's export of wood products, long one of its past mainstays, has dropped from five million tons a year to million and half, and jobs dropped with that. But employment numbers are unknown until Mainstay completes its due diligence, he says.

## **Black lungs**

Maps indicate that the coal would be loaded onto trains at the Powder River Basin mines in Montana and Wyoming, taken through Montana into Washington, then through the Columbia Gorge, down the rail line following the I-5 corridor and into Eugene, where the trains would switch rails onto the newly fixed and reopened CBRL.

The CBRL moves west from Eugene toward Florence, then down the coast through Reedsport to Coos Bay, crossing through forests, past towns and over lakes and rivers on its way. Stevens of the Sierra Club says that for humans, the danger from coal dust is in its mercury, arsenic and lead, which could lead to lung cancer and asthma as well as health issues stemming from the small particulate matter that gets into the lungs.

Lisa Arkin of Beyond Toxics has been working for years on health issues related to train traffic along River Road and in the Trainsong area. Diesel exhaust, like coal dust, is bad for your health. It releases carbon monoxide, sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides and polyaromatic hydrocarbons and their derivatives, Arkin says.

Whatcom Docs, a group of 170 doctors organized against the coal-export terminal in Bellingham, say that diesel particulate matter is associated with increased risk of cancer, pulmonary inflammation and increased heart attacks in adults, and increased asthma and hospital emissions in children.

The doctors say the coal dust from the trains can lead to chronic bronchitis, emphysema, pulmonary fibrosis and environmental contamination through the leaching of toxic heavy metals.

The doctors also have concerns about delayed response times if ambulances are held up by long coal trains at railroad crossings and warn of increased accidents, traumatic injury and death.

Arkin says Union Pacific recently met with a group that included Beyond Toxics, political officials, Lane Regional Air Protection Agency and others to discuss a no-idling policy (UP will turn off a locomotive if it can) to reduce diesel emissions. But UP told the group it can't enforce the policy on other companies using the tracks.

Stevens says the impacts are economic as well. She says coal trains drive away developers along the rail lines and depreciate property values. Coal trains affect the quality of life with noisy, dirty trains chugging through town. And she argues the coal trains congest valuable resources and infrastructure that "we should be using in a way that benefits our economy."

Coal is also a safety issue, Stevens says. The coal dust seeps into the ballast (the rocks under the tracks) and makes it more likely a train could derail.

Callery says coal dust or, as he calls it, "fugitive emissions," was a problem 20 years ago, but now "you simply don't see it." Companies spray the top of the car with a polymer substance that locks in the dust, he says.

Zimmer-Stucky asks, "What happens to that chemical latex when you off-load the coal? Well, it gets burned, too." She says, "That's not a solution."

The aquatic organisms around coal-fired power plants and coal mines aren't the only wet creatures affected by the coal complex. Dan Serres of Columbia Riverkeeper, which has been fighting the coal export terminals along the Columbia River, says the Department of State Lands in December granted the Port of Coos Bay "one of the biggest dredging permits ever issued in the state, and we don't know what the hell it's for."

The dredging, he says, could be for the unknown coal company's terminal, or for the equally controversial and environmentally problematic liquefied natural gas terminal slated for the port. "LNG and coal, neither one of these things are good for Oregon," Serres says.

Callery says the Port of Coos Bay needs to be deepened as the industry changes and vessels get larger. He says the port will benefit the community if it can remain competitive and develop a diversity of cargo base and not depend entirely on wood products. Neither the dredging nor the building of a new terminal will proceed without environmental impact statements and public input, according to Callery. "There are certain benchmark points in the process, where the public and everyone else has an opportunity to comment on the project," Callery says. "There are specific standards that must be met to get permitted."

The dredging “is pretty gnarly in terms of the impact on the bay in Coos County,” Serres says. “I don’t think they’ve really done their homework on the impact,” he says, pointing out that dredging could harm salmon, other fish and oysters, which would further harm the area’s fishing industry.

## Stopping coal in its tracks

“From my perspective, it’s all about ‘Are we doing this blindly?’” says Serres. “A year from now, will we wake up to coal trains rumbling down I-5 to Coos Bay, and people waking up going, ‘What just happened?’”

Pettygrove says the coalition she is working with is bringing together people from Coos Bay and Eugene, from forest activists and Occupy Eugene and everyday people who will be affected by the trains.

Part of that group is the University of Oregon’s Climate Justice League, which has made coal a focus for the year. League co-founder Zachary Stark-MacMillan says the group has worked on a draft resolution to bring before the Eugene City Council against the coal trains. The group is bringing the resolution first to the Eugene Sustainability Commission for endorsement. The draft resolution points out Eugene’s historic pro-environment focus and the potentially devastating effects of the coal trains on the environment and the local community.

The proposed Eugene resolution is part of an effort to garner similar resolutions from cities and counties along the proposed coal route.

The goal, Stark-MacMillan, says is to “send a message to the coal companies that we will do what we can to stop them.”

Pettygrove calls the fight against Big Coal “a very unifying issue” because of the diversity of people it affects. “It’s a chance for environmental groups with a broad range of focus to work together and make a strong statement that we don’t support coal or exporting coal to somewhere else as a solution.” She says, “People in smaller communities have the power to resist this coming through.”

Pettygrove says she believes the coalition can win the battle against Big Coal: “I think that in the big picture the Port of Coos Bay is wasting their time doing this.”

## Coal’s burning issues

- If the Port of Coos Bay becomes a coal export terminal, open-topped coal trains will come through on their way to the coast.
- Coal trains can shed **500 lbs** to a ton of coal dust per car along their route, and each train can have 120 cars.
- Doctors say coal dust from the trains can lead to chronic bronchitis, emphysema, pulmonary fibrosis and environmental contamination through the leaching of **toxic heavy metals**.
- Coal trains average a mile to a mile and half long and can hold up traffic at railroad crossings for 10 to 45 minutes.
- Rock from the Parvin Butte quarry, whose owners were mining without a permit, was slated to be used in the ballast for the Coos Bay Rail Link that would bring the coal to the coast.
- **37%** of Oregon’s electricity comes from coal burning and although Oregon’s only coal-fired plant will stop burning coal in 2020, power companies import coal-produced electricity.

# Coal online

For more information on the anti-coal train coalition, go to the Coalition to Resist Coal Trains Through Eugene Facebook page at <http://wkly.ws/164>

For the Sightline Institute's lengthy investigation into coal in the Northwest go to <http://wkly.ws/165>

For a look at Balance Media's video on coal exports go to <http://wkly.ws/f>

UO's Climate Justice League wants to stop coal trains from coming through Eugene. Photo by Trask Bedortha

map courtesy sierra club

[Table of Contents](#) | [News](#) | [Views](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Film](#) | [Music](#) | [Culture](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Personals](#)  
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