



Northwest Coal Exports

Common questions about economics, health, and pollution

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With demand for coal plummeting in North America, coal companies are turning to Asia. They hope to take coal mined on public lands in Montana and Wyoming and haul it by rail to Pacific ports. From there, coal would be loaded onto ships bound for Asia, particularly China, where it would be burned for electricity. But there is a missing link in the supply chain: export terminals in Northwest communities.

What do coal companies propose?

Coal interests have proposed to build new export terminals at Cherry Point and Longview in Washington, and at the Port of St. Helens, the Port of Morrow, and Coos Bay in Oregon. Together, these five facilities could multiply American coal exports to China tenfold, and would make the Pacific Northwest the single largest conduit of coal from the US to the developing world.

Do coal terminals make good neighbors?

Despite efforts to control it, dust from the massive open-air coal piles stored at ports frequently escapes into nearby neighborhoods and waterways. Communities near coal export terminals in Australia, South Africa, British Columbia, Virginia, and South Carolina report that dust and debris blackens homes, outdoor furniture, fishing boats, cars, windowsills, and plants. In Seward, Alaska, residents have sued terminal operators for polluting the town's scenic harbor.

Does rail transport increase coal dust?

Coal dust also escapes from open-top railroad cars, which can create safety problems along rail routes. Accumulating coal dust has caused derailments by weakening railroad tracks, and it can even cause spontaneous slow-burning fires in coal cars.

Is coal dust harmful?

Coal dust degrades water quality and may pose a danger to residents' health. Ample scientific evidence shows that coal workers exposed to dust suffer elevated rates of bronchitis, emphysema, and black lung disease. One study found that children living near a coal dock were more likely to miss school because of respiratory problems, but the dangers of incidental or infrequent exposure to coal dust are unknown.

Will coal trains create traffic congestion?

The trains that would move coal from the mines to the export terminals are almost certain to worsen traffic congestion and impair truck freight in many communities along the rail route. Several independent analyses have shown that coal trains will block at-grade railroad crossings for one to three hours of every day in some urban locations.

Won't China just burn other coal supplies if we don't export it?

Following fundamental economic principles, an increase of the supply of coal will drive down prices, making it attractive for Asian countries to burn greater quantities of dirty fuel. Low-cost US coal may even encourage developing countries to invest in new coal plants, which could lock-in high levels of coal consumption for decades.

Can Chinese coal burning harm the Northwest?

Researchers have found sulfur compounds, soot, and other byproducts of Asian coal combustion on mountaintops in the western US. Scientists have also traced asthma-inducing ozone and local mercury pollution, a potent neurotoxin that is particularly harmful to children, back to Asian countries burning dirty fuels.

Are coal exports a good strategy for jobs?

Coal export terminals, which store piles of coal on waterfront industrial land, employ surprisingly few people relative to other uses of port space. For example, the proposed terminal at Longview would produce fewer than 0.2 jobs per acre. By contrast, a FedEx distribution center on a cleaned-up port site in Troutdale, Oregon created 1.1 jobs per acre, and another redeveloped port site that will handle wind turbines and other cargo in Vancouver, Washington is expected to generate 3.4 jobs per acre.

Will Canada ship the coal if the US does not?

Large increases in shipments of American coal from British Columbia are highly unlikely. Terminal space is limited, and the current practice of exporting Canadian steelmaking coal is more lucrative. Expansions currently planned for BC's terminals would provide only a small fraction of the capacity that current export proposals call for. In fact, the coal industry itself has repeatedly said that it needs new terminals in the Northwest in order to realize its plans to export to Asia.

What is the history of coal exports on the West Coast?

In the 1980s and 1990s, West Coast port cities gambled on coal-export facilities, and lost. After investing millions of dollars and dedicating sizeable chunks of their harbor to coal export facilities, both Portland and Los Angeles watched promised revenues evaporate. The abandoned facilities represented millions in stranded investments and cleanup expenses, as well as missed opportunities for more durable economic development choices.

For more information about Northwest coal exports, along with detailed citations for the facts in this document, please see Sightline's full-length, "Northwest Coal Exports" report at <http://www.sightline.org/research/coal-export-faq/>.

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