



Smoke rises from fires caused by the derailment of a CN Railway train carrying crude oil near the northern Ontario community of Gogama, Ontario in this March 7, 2015 handout photo obtained by Reuters from Transport Safety Board of Canada (TSBCanada). The derailment, which occurred March 7, is CN's second in the region in just three days and the third in less than a month. It was the latest in a series of North American derailments involving trains hauling crude oil.
REUTERS/TSBCANADA

Cultures, crude and the Columbia

What does Portland's plan for new fossil fuel operations mean for our gorge and beyond?

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In September, Mayor Charlie Hales announced that he had a new customer at the Port of Portland – the Pembina Corporation. Pembina, based in Canada, plans to build a \$500 million propane terminal at the port, potentially marking the first time the city of Portland enters the fossil fuel export business.

The mayor champions the proposal as the single largest investment in the city's history, and one that could support up to 40 jobs. But entertaining this proposal seems to mark a symbolic shift for the region, and adds to several fossil fuel proposals already slated for the Columbia River gorge. Opponents say these projects threaten to undo decades of work to restore the ecological relationships of the Columbia River, including its salmon runs, and will exacerbate climate changes already harming our region. They also point to the recent spate of spectacular oil train derailments, noting that transporting propane will only multiply these risks.

For their part, company spokespeople have attempted to brand propane as a different kind of fossil fuel, locked in an existential and perhaps even eco-friendly battle with the dirty fossil fuels. Proponents have also claimed that the kind of accidents seen in the media will not happen in Portland due to the company's vigilance and safety policies.

In December, the White House made matters even more confusing, labeling Portland a "climate champion." As time goes on, however, the claims of both safety and climate-neutrality are becoming harder to believe.

Just this week, a conference in Olympia, Wash., was organized by Railroad Workers United and the Backbone Campaign, putting railworkers, environmentalists, and firefighters together to share information and concerns about the safety of fossil fuels moving by rail. At Evergreen State College's longhouse, rail workers revealed to a stunned audience of 100 people that the average train operator suffers chronic exhaustion and sleep deprivation. At least one worker in attendance reported being asked to move an oil train with inadequate rest, with full knowledge they would be disciplined or fired for refusing. In an effort to cut costs and move products efficiently, worker reports of safety hazards are also routinely downplayed or ignored, leaving them with little confidence in their own safety, let alone the communities affected by accidents. With trains already up to a mile long, the two train operators onboard the front of a train can't even see if the back is on fire. Despite this, companies have pushed to reduce crew size. Rail workers at the conference demanded the maintenance of two-person crews, and an end to draconian attendance policies that put exhausted workers and the general public at risk.

In August 2011, when a single propane tanker with a capacity of 29,000 gallons caught fire in Lincoln, Calif., the local fire chief Dave Whitt compared the blaze to a small thermonuclear bomb.

If Pembina can convince Portland's Planning and Sustainability Commission that the company can safely move a daily load of 1.6 million gallons of liquid propane via train through Portland, the Commission will give a green light to the zoning change they need to construct a pipeline, and city councilors are likely to adopt their recommendation. This is probably the toughest hurdle in the permitting process, and with it out of the way, the terminal is likely to open for business in 2018 – supplied by a fleet of mile-long propane trains passing through Portland and gorge communities daily.

On March 10, the Port of Longview denied a similar propane proposal in a 3-0 decision. One project critic in Longview accused the company of taking "short cuts" on safety discussions, with company officials disregarding questions of train safety. Diane Dick, a county resident for 30 years, said that train safety was her main concern – something the company could not guarantee. "Every 100-car propane train carries the energy equivalent of 3 atom bombs – they don't call them bomb trains for nothing," Dick said. "I don't want this for Longview or for Portland, and I certainly don't want the propane trains or river

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