

An oil train traveling
through the Columbia Gorge

Defending the gorge

VIDEO STILL BY VALLEYSUBRAILS

Pacific Northwest tribes hold their ground against the fossil fuel industry's encroachment

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Two months ago, I wrote about the Port of Portland's plan to build propane export facilities, investigated the problem of "bomb" trains and the blast zone around the terminal, and dug into Pembina Corp.'s operations in Canada.

Much has happened since then. On April 7, the Swinomish tribe in Washington filed a lawsuit against BNSF oil trains. On April 9, Portland's Planning and Sustainability Commission (PSC) voted in favor of Pembina's pipeline, raising howls of opposition. On May 6 the Tories of Alberta were unseated after 44 years of rule — kicked out by a wave of opposition to the fossil fuel industry that finally crashed along with oil prices. The socialist New Democratic Party now in charge promises to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

On May 7, Mayor Charlie Hales cleaned up the PSC's mess and dropped his support for Pembina. On May 16, thousands of activists showed up in Seattle to obstruct Shell's Arctic drilling fleet, including hundreds of "kayactivists" on the water, who took leadership from Alaskan and Puget Sound tribes fighting coal and oil companies.

On May 19, an oil pipeline ruptured on the California coast, spilling over 100,000 gallons of oil and creating a nine-mile ocean slick. And on June 4 the Coast Salish Nation, representing dozens of powerful tribes in the region, announced a unanimous agreement to protect the Salish Sea from crude oil shipments by rail, pipe and sea.

Following these successful calls for solidarity from First Nations, the Unitarian Universalist Church in Portland is asking people to bear witness to tribal struggles to

protect sacred land — particularly the Lummi Nation in Washington's Puget Sound, who are currently fighting the largest coal export terminal in the country.

On June 27, members of the Lummi Nation will join the Unitarian Universalist's annual General Assembly to discuss how the public can address climate change by centering indigenous struggles. Event organizers say their intent is to create stronger alliances across environmental and faith groups, and send a strong message of solidarity to indigenous nations in the fight against fossil fuels and other extractive industries. The event begins at 4:45 p.m. at the Oregon Convention Center. It is both free and open to the public.

The People's Victory and the Port's Outrage

The mayor got a bit bruised during his brief foray into the world of propane exports. "Fossil fuel" Charlie received countless phone calls, e-mails, public records requests and a string of difficult questions regarding his consultation policies with local tribes. Suddenly, feeling which way the wind was blowing and perhaps noting the oil train that caught fire the day before, Charlie shed his fossil fuel title on May 7 and publicly dropped his support for the project, telling the press, "At some point those of us in power have to listen to those who put us there."

That same morning Tim Norgren, a local member of Laborers' International Union of North America, locked himself to the train tracks feeding an oil terminal in Northwest Portland, stating his opposition to bomb trains, climate chaos, and the new "free trade" deal that he said would drive both.

Shortly before the mayor's public announcement, Hales' staff also reached out to the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission to re-establish regular meetings with local tribes — a city commitment that was originally dropped after Hales took office in 2013.

Though Hales' words were music to many, they were very displeasing to Port Director Bill Wyatt, who seemed worried about his business prospects with fracked gas no longer on the table. Wyatt has since pontificated on the new and dangerous effects of popular opinion, asking "... What does that mean for other companies that do business at the port? What if someone thinks we shouldn't be shipping GMO corn to Korea?" The Portland Business Alliance warmly agreed, suggesting that fossil fuel jobs are the only way to create equity in the city. Never to be upstaged, The Oregonian's editorial board revved up its brain engines and sputtered hard, accusing the mayor of creating lost job "casualties" and urging us to "refuse to look the other way while the mayor kneecaps the city's reputation."

Knowing a good team when it sees one, Pembina announced it would stay and fight, revoking the CEO's earlier promise to leave "if it turns out the people of Portland don't want this." The company is currently funding a PR blitz demanding that the city council vote on Pembina's proposal despite a total lack of interest — which could invite a lawsuit if any formal decision is made. When asked for her legal opinion, City Attorney Tracy Reeves argued there is no requirement to put Pembina on the council agenda.

The mayor's surrender to popular opinion is clearly a reflection of climate change awareness in Portland, as well as effective groundwork in its local environmental scene.

It was also sweet vindication for the hundred people who turned out to speak with the PSC back in April, including Paul Lumley, executive director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

There Lumley informed commissioners that, contrary to rumors, the tribes he represented had not actually been consulted on the project, and at least one of these tribes had serious concerns about explosive propane trains making frequent visits to popular fishing sites and passing by fishing communities. Cathy Sampson-Kruse, a Walla Walla tribal elder, explained to commissioners that their lack of consultation violated their own policies on tribal relations, which were established in 2012 to help the city be a better neighbor to tribes, and to avoid being sued by them. Strangely, PSC Commissioner Karen Gray was very forward in asking city planner Tom Armstrong if the project would violate treaty rights, then mysteriously voted in favor of the project, allowing it to squeak by 6-4.

"The answer is: You have to ask the tribes," Lumley later explained in an interview, "But it sure seems like it would affect their treaty-reserved resources." In other words: consult!

This little oversight loomed larger in the following weeks when Walter Echo-Hawk, a renowned indigenous legal scholar, held a talking circle on treaty rights and consultation at PSU, calling on the city to re-commit to consultation (an event humbly attended by members of the PSC). While these conversations moved forward, activist groups bird-dogged the mayor at events and disrupted his council hearings, where they performed surreal political theater with

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