

Coal dust hovers over a train traveling through the Columbia Gorge.



## Indigenous protectors of a heating planet

*Native Americans are battling hate groups along with environmental degradation in their fight for the Gorge*

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**W**hen it comes to environmental destruction, Northwest tribes typically have the most to lose.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Native Americans of the Northwest have delivered some of the strongest blows to plans that would turn the Northwest into a massive coal chute to Asia.

The Columbia River Gorge was once a superhighway for salmon before dams were built. As hard-fought recovery plans and improved river management are finally coming into effect, fossil fuel companies from outside the region have decided to transform the river into a fossil fuel freeway. This has led to opposition everywhere from the mines in Montana to rail-side communities in places like Spokane, with air quality advocates standing united with Columbia River fishermen, and a huge wave of opponents calling for a stop to climate change.

According to Twa-le Abrahamson-Swan, air quality coordinator for the Spokane Tribe, "Tribal fishing rights are a major force for environmental protection in the Northwest, especially on fossil fuel terminals." The results of those rights have already been striking: In August, the Yakama Nation shot down the Morrow Pacific coal terminal in Boardman, and is currently opposing the Tesoro/Savage oil terminal in Vancouver. In April the Swinomish filed a lawsuit to stop oil trains from passing over

their reservation en route to a Tesoro refinery in March Point, near Anacortes, Wash. Puget Sound, the Lummi Nation is successfully beating back a proposal to construct the largest coal port in North America, which would not only interfere with their tribal fishing fleet, but also send numerous uncovered coal trains through Gorge cities, including Portland.

According to BNSF, a single railcar traveling its entire route can lose between 500 pounds to a ton of coal dust. The U.S. Department of Transportation classifies this dust as a "pernicious ballast foulant," meaning it can weaken and destabilize tracks, leading to derailment.

Faced with difficult facts and an extensive network organizing against it, the coal industry has attempted to create an angry backlash to attack opponents. In effect, the backers of new coal terminals have attempted to re-start networks that spawned the infamous "Wise Use" movement of the 1990s, which saw timber giants paying white supremacists and militia groups to harass and assault environmental activists. While it may seem unlikely for some, the potential for such an alliance is still alive today, and moves have already been made to ally coal exports with white supremacist and anti-Indian organizations.

### Coal's Image Problem

The Alliance for Northwest Jobs and Exports was the original industry front group promoting coal terminals in

Washington and Oregon. The three still remaining are opposed by the Yakama, the Cowlitz and the Lummi for impacts to the specific terminal sites, and by all the tribes of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians for their dispersed effects on climate change, fishing rights and airborne coal dust.

"There are groups that are pulling coal out of the river now," says Twa-le Abrahamson-Swan of the Spokane Tribe. "We have fishermen on the Columbia River that are being impacted by coal now. In some areas the wind is already blowing coal dust right onto them. And there's even a lawsuit in the works now because coal has already spilled into the river."

Although supported by unions that would financially benefit from coal exports, the Alliance for Northwest Jobs has clearly struggled with their message to the general public.

This became especially obvious in October 2013 when its PR spokesperson from Edelman was recorded at a coal conference by an independent journalist.

The spokeswoman, Lauri Hennessey, recalled being reprimanded by one of her clients at Peabody for telling Seattle residents that her organization cared about climate change.

"You were quoted saying 'Of course we worry about climate change'? We don't believe in climate change!" Hennessey recalled to a vice president from Arch Coal.

"And I remember I was on the phone and I was like 'Well, I can't say that - I can't say that in Seattle!'"

The Alliance decided to drop Edelman's services after the audio recording became public, but the incident was surprisingly tame compared to then-current dialogue in Whatcom County, Wash.

### Coal jobs meet white pride

The main obstacle for the coal port near Bellingham is the political power of the Lummi Nation, a fishing people who have co-existed with marine life in the Puget Sound for over 3,500 years. After the coal developers purposely desecrated an ancient Lummi village site, constructing four miles of roads without consulting or asking anyone for permission, the tribes ceremoniously burned a giant check from the coal companies, and have repeatedly told government agencies to deny their permits ever since - a request that is likely to be honored by federal permitting agencies.

"Many letters to the editor in Whatcom County have tried to paint the Lummi Nation as a kind of special interest interfering in the economy," says Matt Petryni of RE Sources, a non-profit based in Bellingham. "We don't know if these are coming from the coal developers, but many of us are suspicious."

In April 2013, a group calling itself the Citizens Equal Rights Alliance (CERA) hosted a conference in Bellingham - near both the Lummi Nation and the proposed Gateway Pacific coal terminal that they say would badly disrupt their tribal fishing fleet.

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