



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 COMPLEX

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.

"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.

