

The Ambre Energy proposal called for shipping 3.5 million tons of coal per year by train to the terminal near Boardman, where it would then be barged down the Columbia to Clatskanie to be loaded onto ocean-going vessels. The DSL said the proposal “is not consistent with the protection, conservation and best use of the state’s water resources, and that the applicant did not provide sufficient analysis of alternatives that would avoid construction of a new dock and impacts on tribal fisheries.”

The decision was praised not only by environmentalists but also by recreational fishermen who fear the impacts to their industry, and by Northwest tribes. Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission Chairman Carlos Smith said the denial “reaffirms the tribal treaty right to fish, is in the best interest of the Columbia Basin’s salmon populations and our communities.”

“We know we’ve got a delay; we don’t know that we’ve won,” O’Leary cautions, and points out the fishing industry still faces a coal export-proposal by Millennium Bulk Terminals out of Longview, Washington, as well as the possibility the DSL decision could be appealed or the proposed site moved.

PREDATORS

Coal export is not the only factor preying upon the Columbia’s delicate salmon populations. Before the fossil fuel industry’s coal and oil trains began to threaten the waters and salmonids of the mighty Columbia, hydropower had already reduced salmon numbers not by the thousands but by the millions. CRITFC estimates that 13,000 miles of the Columbia River Basin were once home to salmon, with their migrations reaching all the way to Canada, Montana and Nevada.

Salmon spend one to seven years in the ocean and then return to their home streams to spawn. Returning fish must swim past recreational, tribal and commercial fishermen, sea lions and seals. They need to get past the Columbia’s massive dams.

The state, tribes and Army Corps of Engineers, which runs the dams, supplement the native fish with hatchery-

salmon at Washington state’s Roza Dam on the Yakima River have already survived test runs.

Once past the dams, the young salmon face Caspian terns, double-crested cormorants, walleye, bass and northern pikeminnow, Stansell says, all of which find the smolt tasty. Some of the methods for protecting the salmon from predators are as controversial to animal lovers as coal export is to enviros: screamer shells and propane cannons to haze away terns, “lethal take” of the cormorants (killing them), and branding and sometimes killing seal lions known to be eating the salmon.

COAL, HARD EFFECTS

After hooking the coho but not much else on the Washington side of the mouth of the Columbia, Rees guides his boat back to the Oregon side to troll there. “The key to catching fish is to let them chew on it for a while,” he says as he baits the rods and hooks, two with herring and two more with anchovies.

Rees trolls for salmon with his clients, but he says 25-100 miles upriver from Astoria on the Columbia are the anchor fishermen, who like the tribal and commercial fishermen, also stand to be affected by coal export along the river.

While waiting for the salmon to chew, O’Leary pulls a handful of coal dust from his backpack to illustrate the problem. This coal, he says, came from train tracks near Horsethief Lake in the Columbia Gorge. “I got it less than 50 yards from the river,” he says, “which flies in the face of claims that coal dust does not fall into the Columbia River.”

The sun rises and the air begins to warm — as does the water, gradually reducing the chances of catching a salmon. But before the morning is over a Chinook seizes one of the hooks trailing the water beneath Rees’ boat. Reeling the fish in is a brief but adrenalin-fueled tussle. Rees skillfully nets the fish and pulls it aboard. He identifies it by its fin clip as a Rogue River strain Chinook, a hatchery fish prized by the nearby commercial fisheries and particularly good eating.



MICHAEL O'LEARY
HOLDS COAL DUST
PICKED UP ALONG
THE COLUMBIA

PHOTO BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

unloading, storage and vessel transport — will result in increased habitat and wildlife exposure to polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, the study says. PAHs linger in the environment, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA says mice exposed to PAHs through food, breathing and skin contact grew tumors, have reproductive problems and other “effects include damage to the skin, body fluids and the immune system.”

Finally, coal burning results in increased habitat and wildlife contamination from mercury bleeding into watersheds and the food web, and it has a link to increasing ocean acidification. Ocean acidification (known as climate change’s evil twin) has already harmed Oregon’s oyster hatcheries.

Rees points out that acidification could affect the plankton, shrimp and other invertebrates salmon feed on and have repercussions for the fish and the fishing industry.

Rather than rest on the laurels of the denial of the Ambre Energy dredging permit, O’Leary says, “Tactically, we’re ready to shift attention to the other side of the river at [the proposed export terminal at] Longview and the oil export drama.”

The same tracks that carry coal trains along the river also carry potentially explosive oil trains. The day after the DSL denied the dredging permit, the Oregon Department of Transportation approved a ConnectOregon grant of \$2 million to expand a dock at the Port Westward near Clatskanie that is linked to oil export projects. It turned down the port’s request for \$2 million to expand another, coal-related, dock. ODOT also approved \$2.9 million for safety improvements along the rail line in Rainier, Oregon, that would allow more and faster oil trains.

On Aug. 19, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality approved an emissions control permit for an oil train terminal along the Columbia that allows the firm Global Partners to significantly increase the amount of crude oil it ships. Earlier this year Oregon fined Global Partners \$117,292 for shipping six times more crude oil than its previous permit allowed.

That adrenaline of catching, and the satisfaction of later cooking and eating what is caught, brings people back on board to fish time and time again, Halverson says. And Rees adds it was this hunting-and-gathering aspect that led him to become a fishing guide.

People come back every year, he says, “It’s ritualistic for them.” They bring their friends, and “they bring their kids and introduce them to fishing — little advocates for fish and wildlife.”

When the boat returns to the dock, Rees guts and filets the fish with a practiced hand, its slick orange-red flesh a stark contrast to the dark lumps of coal O’Leary carries as a reminder of what the salmon and fishermen are up against. ■



COAL DUST ALONG THE COLUMBIA

PHOTO BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

bred ones, marked by clipped fins. Robert Stansell from Bonneville Lock and Dam’s Fish Field Unit says the corps has an obligation to produce hatchery fish to mitigate the losses caused by the dams.

After the salmon have spawned, most die. Once the fry begin to mature, they head downstream to the ocean. Stansell says there are different ways salmon get past the dams. He says 85 percent of juveniles make it through via bypass facilities. The methods to get fish past dams vary, but they include fish screens as well as putting mature fish on barges or even trucks.

One possible ploy that’s been getting a lot of social media attention lately, including a shout out on the website I Fucking Love Science, is a “salmon cannon” made by Whooshh Innovations that would essentially shoot the fish over the dam in a long, wet tube at 15-22 mph. Some

Rees swiftly bashes the fish over the head to kill it and the fish is soon held aloft for a photo, silvery scales glistening in the sun.

According to the Northwest Steelheaders and NWF study, “The True Cost of Coal,” not enough is known about the interactions of coal with river habitats, and the possible negative impacts are massive.

Dredging the river and harbors, as proposed at Morrow, could detrimentally impact forage fish and fish habitat, altering feeding habits and migration routes. Increased shipping traffic would impair river and harbor access, “increasing potential collisions at traditional anchor and harvest locations” for not only fishing but also crabbing, as small fishing boats jockey for space with massive coal freighters.

The dust flying off the trains chugging beside the Columbia — as well as the dust that escapes during