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Toxic Coal Blues

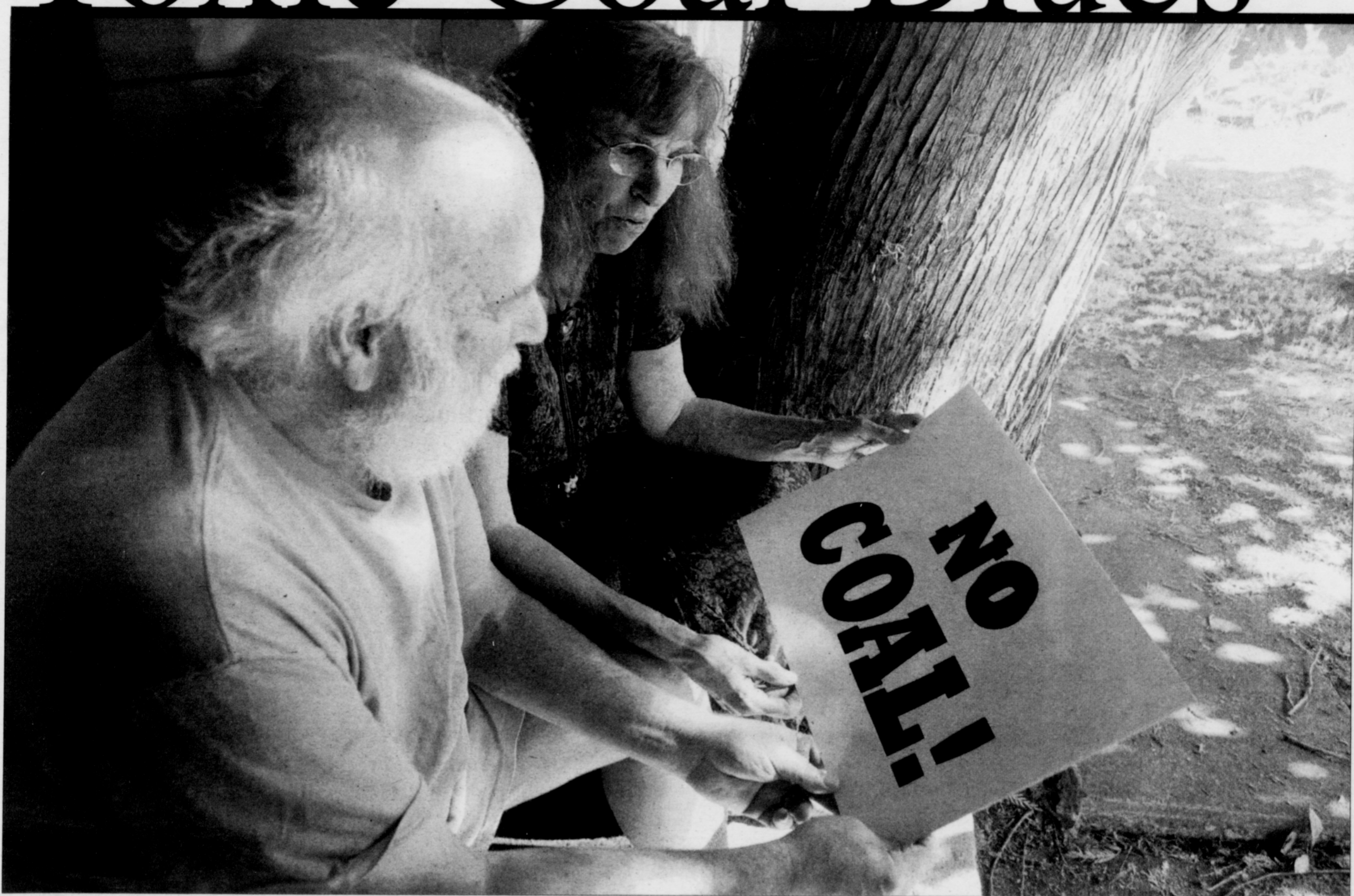


PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Bonnie Meltzer and her husband sit on the front porch of their north Portland home, just five blocks from a railroad line that would transport huge amounts of coal to Asia markets. The couple expects toxic coal dust to invade their space.

Opposition grows on plans to ship coal through Portland

BY MINDY COOPER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Plans to ship coal through Portland and build export terminals along the Columbia River on both sides of the Cascades is drawing local residents into an environmental battle.

Oregon's Department of State Lands is considering the first of three proposals to move huge amounts of coal from Montana and Wyoming through the Columbia Gorge to Asia.

According to Regna Merritt of Oregon Physicians of Social Responsibility, coal creates a substantial number of health risks, from the exposure to people working in coal mines, to the coal dust and diesel emitted along transporta-

tion routes, to the air pollution caused by burning the fossil fuel itself.

"The toxic effects of mercury and diesel particulate pollution are real and measurable," she said.

The concerns also include noise pollution in neighborhoods from several mile-long coal trains each day, the disruption of pedestrian and vehicle traffic, the impact of barge traffic on the Columbia River, and the blowback of toxic waste to the Pacific Northwest after the coal is burned in Asia.

"We are talking asthma and chronic bronchitis, and an increased risk of stroke, heart attack, cancer and emphysema," Merritt said.

With an estimated 60 trains a day, 30 full trains and 30 empty, passing on the railroad lines behind community

houses in north and northeast Portland, Vancouver and other local communities, a massive amount of diesel and coal dust will be going through the community, the activists said.

"Already north Portland is exposed to a lot of diesel through its relative proximity to I-5 and I-84 and the airport. So residents of north Portland are already disproportionately burdened by risks of air pollution," Merritt said.

"The great irony is we are finally starting to clean up the air, and it would be a huge step backwards for residents," she said. "It is certain to affect the people who live along the lines."

Bonnie Meltzer has lived with her husband in north Portland for the past four decades. She grows more than 50 percent of her food with 24 raised organic garden beds, a

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