

## Washington State Faces Quandary: Export Coal That's Too Dirty to Burn?

SEATTLE (AP) — Just as Washington is weaning itself off coal, two companies are pushing to make the state a leading exporter of the fossil fuel.

That has led environmentalists to wonder: If coal is so dirty that Washington won't use it, should the state be sending it overseas?

Last year, a seaport just across the U.S. border in Delta, British Columbia, shipped 27 million tons of North American coal abroad. It's the busiest coal-export operation on the continent.

Now a company wants to ship up to 60 million tons of coal a year from refurbished docks near the Columbia River's mouth. Another company, which has a contract to export 24 million tons of Rocky Mountain coal each year, plans to build a major shipping terminal near Bellingham.

"It's a terrible, unprecedented idea," said Brett VandenHeuvel, executive director of the nonprofit Columbia Riverkeeper, told The Seattle Times. "If we supply China with a large and inexpensive source of coal, then they're more likely to just keep burning it."

When Cowlitz County granted a permit for a coal-shipping terminal in Longview, VandenHeuvel and others appealed. Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer came to Washington to remind the state that Montana had helped supply TransAlta's coal for years, and several other Washington utilities have owned a piece of a coal-fired power plant in tiny Colstrip, Mont.

"It's difficult for me to understand, since Washington state and your utilities invested in coal-fired plants in south-central

Montana for three decades," Schweitzer said in an interview. "You've been digging our coal, burning our coal, and building your economy on our coal for years."

The situation overseas complicated the debate. China has committed to cleaning up its energy. It is developing wind, solar and geothermal technology and is mandating strict pollution controls on power plants.

**'It's a terrible, unprecedented idea'**

*Brett VandenHeuvel, Columbia Riverkeeper*

But China still gets nearly 70 percent of its power from coal and that isn't expected to change soon because the country is building coal-burning power plants.

Some experts believe the U.S. should accept coal's growth as unavoidable and focus on cleaning its emissions.

"It's a paradox," said Charles Ebinger, director of the Brookings Institution's energy policy initiative. "The Chinese are really moving vigorously on green technology, but Asia is growing so fast that demand for energy of all forms is going through the roof."

The Chinese perspective on this debate is nuanced, said Joel Darmstadter, an energy and climate analyst with Resources for the Future, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

"That theme has even surfaced on the

part of the Chinese themselves, who say we're being sanctimonious about our concern with the environment, given that a third of our energy still comes from coal and we consume the products China makes with its cheap energy," he said.

In fact, coal use in the U.S. is not really growing — but coal mining is. Just last week, the federal government agreed to lease access to an additional 750 million tons of coal in the Powder River Basin.

In Montana, Schweitzer said it's unfair that his state has little say about where that coal can go just because Montana doesn't have a seaport.

"What's next? Montana is known for producing some of the finest malting barley that's exported off the West Coast," he said. "Will somebody show up next month and say alcohol is a contributor to poor health and we don't support alcohol, so you can't ship it from here?"

China, too, is blessed with coal. But its mines are dirty and dangerous, and its rail

infrastructure is so bogged down it's easier for coastal cities to import coal from overseas. If the fuel doesn't come from the U.S., it will come from South Africa or Australia or somewhere else, said Ebinger, at Brookings.

The current best hope for cleaner Asian emissions is to effectively capture and store that carbon forever underground. But energy experts say that process is prohibitively expensive.

David Pumphrey, an energy expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the decision on coal exports "will make no difference in the amount of coal China burns."

And Mike Davis, an energy expert at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Richland, said arguing over which fuel is dirtiest isn't helpful.

Instead, governments should set hard clean-energy standards and let businesses figure out how to meet them, he said. That's the way to draw research money and drive innovation to make things like coal cleaner, he added.



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