

Fight Intensifies Over NW Coal Exports

By **Phuong Le**
The Associated Press

BELLINGHAM, Wash. (AP) — The progressive college town of Bellingham, Wash., is known for its stunning scenery, access to the outdoors and eclectic mix of aging hippies, students and other residents. But lately it's turned into a battleground in the debate over whether the Pacific Northwest should become the hub for exporting U.S. coal to Asia.

Five ports proposed for Washington and Oregon could ship as much as 140 million tons of coal, mostly from the Rockies, where it could travel by rail through communities such as Spokane, Seattle and Eugene, Ore., before being loaded onto ships bound for Asia.

The Cherry Point marine terminal would be the largest coal-export port in the U.S., exporting up to 54 million tons of bulk commodities, mostly coal.

With so much at stake, critics and supporters have intensified their pitches in recent weeks, running TV and radio spots, doorbell ringing homes and turning to phone banks and social media to rally support for their side.

Hundreds packed a public hearing in Bellingham last week to tell regulators what should be analyzed during the environmental review process. Hearings in Seattle, Vancouver and Spokane are also expected to draw crowds.

"This flies in the face about what are we about as a region, as far as our leadership on building a clean economy and saying no to coal. We're seen as a region that leads with innovation," said Kimberly Larson, with the Power Past Coal campaign. "Are we going backward or forward?"

Environmentalists, some Northwest tribes and others want regulators to study the cumulative effects all five projects: increased train traffic, carbon emissions from burning coal overseas and other health and environmental concerns.

Project supporters say it's not practical to lump the projects together. Only some ports will be built, they say, and each has different circumstances.

"Most of the people who are proposing that just view it as an opportunity to grind everything to a halt," said Craig Cole, a spokesman for developer Seattle-based SSA

Marine. "We are expecting a very full review of the impacts of this project."

Even as environmental reviews have started for three coal-export projects at Cherry Point, Port of Mor-

row, Ore., and Longview Wash., the Army Corps of Engineers hasn't decided whether it'll conduct a broader environmental review for all the projects.

"We haven't made that determination yet," said corps spokeswoman Michael Coffey. "We're not saying yes and we're not saying no either."

Two other projects are proposed in Oregon at Coos Bay and St. Helens. Another in Grays Harbor County, Wash., was shelved over the summer, after the developer decided to explore other terminal uses.

Meanwhile, a trade group that includes the three largest U.S. coal producers has been running TV and newspaper ads to tout jobs, tax revenues and other economic benefits.

"We feel that someone is going to supply the coal to the ports that need it. ... The question is: where is that coal going to come from?" said Lauri Hennessey, a spokeswoman for the Alliance for Northwest Jobs & Exports, which includes BNSF Railway and companies such as Peabody Coal, Arch Coal and Ambre Energy with stakes in the Northwest projects. "That coal can be sent through Washington and Oregon ports in a way that's environmentally responsible."

Several union leaders and some lawmakers say the region can't afford to turn down well-paying jobs. The company



Bellingham set up by ReSources, a local group that has been organizing against the project. "I think it will impact everyone in this community."

Volunteers have made 32,000 phone calls and hope to make tens of thousands more to educate people about the project, said Matt Petryni, Power Past Coal Campaign organizer. The Sierra Club is also running TV ads in Eastern Washington to warn of risks. It has plans to run more ads statewide and in Oregon.

The Cherry Point area is noted for extensive herring spawning grounds. It's also known burial grounds for the Lummi Nation. The tribe recently came out against the project.

"We do not want any further disturbance," said Jewell James, who manages the tribe's sovereignty and treaty protection office. "It's also a treaty rights issue. This always has been a major fishing and harvesting site for our fishermen."

On a recent afternoon, SSA Marine's Cole pointed to the site, near marine terminals for two oil refineries and an aluminum smelter. "This site has been intended for this purpose," said Cole, a former Whatcom County Councilman. He said the company plans to follow the highest environmental standards.

"The hoops that the company has to jump through are very extraordinary. They're really high. You have to prove that you can avoid impacts, minimize them or mitigate them," Cole said.

But neighbors and others who gathered in Cindy Franklin's living room for a letter-writing workshop that same afternoon weren't so sure.

"I'm afraid that this new race to get all this coal out of the ground, sell it under the guise of energy independence ... is going to destroy our atmosphere," said Franklin, 59, retired business consultant and environmental activist. "It's about the burning of the coal being a major contributor to climate change. We need to do all we can to stop this."

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says the \$665 million project will create 1,250 permanent direct and indirect jobs and generate \$11 million in tax revenues; critics are skeptical.


"Some groups have demonized a natural resource and they think nobody on the planet should burn this material. I disagree. We need jobs," said Mike Elliott, chairman of the state's Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen.

Trains already carry coal from the Rockies through the state for export through British Columbia. But Bellingham resident Lynn Berman and others fear the increase in coal shipments — about nine mile-long trains a day — could threaten fisheries, create health problems and foul the area's natural resources.

"It's such a bad idea," said Berman, who worked the phone bank one afternoon in the field office in downtown

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