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The Coal Pipeline: In Pacific Northwest, A Local Battle Has Global Fallout

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BELLINGHAM, Wash. -- The flyer and I landed in Matt Krogh's Bellingham office on the same October afternoon. I had stopped by to hear why he thought building the country's largest coal port just north of town was a bad idea; the four-page full-color mailing had arrived to try to convince him otherwise.

That day, tens of thousands of the flyers filled mailboxes in the northwest corner of Washington state. "These people have a lot of money," says Krogh, who works with the nonprofit RE Sources for Sustainable Communities in Bellingham. Indeed, [promoting the port](#) is Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, owned by Warren Buffett's holding company; Peabody Energy, the world's largest coal company; and SSA Marine, a division of the world's largest cargo terminal operator Carrix, half of which is owned by Goldman Sachs.

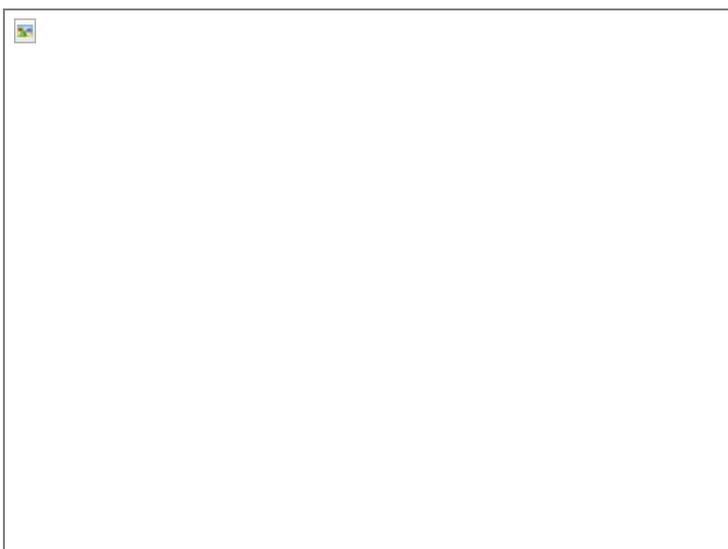
Under the tagline, "Opportunity: The Right Idea. The Right Place. The Right Time," the front page of the mailing asserts that the proposed [Gateway Pacific Terminal](#) "will provide America with a new and highly efficient way to ship dry bulk commodities such as grain, potash and coal to Asian markets." Inside, flanked by pictures of a healthy looking pelican and working men, is more information on the numbers of jobs, tax revenue and environmental safeguards involved in the plan.

Krogh is eager to refute the pamphlet's points. To start, he notes that shipments out of the port would consist almost solely of the last commodity listed: coal. Forty-eight million tons of it would be shipped every year once the facility reached its planned full capacity. Another eight million tons of grain or potash, a powdery salt used primarily in fertilizers, might be added.

That coal and its potential implications has sparked a fierce fight in this otherwise quiet college town. On one side are labor unions and other terminal supporters, who tout the jobs and tax revenue that building the port, which is estimated to cost \$500 million, could bring. The opposition includes doctors, business owners, ecologists and community activists, who are concerned about harm to the air and water, among other potential health, environmental and economic consequences of both the port itself and the additional 18 trains that would rumble through town daily.

Bellingham is not alone in its concerns. The mile-and-a-half long coal trains would wind through dozens of Western communities, including the cities of Spokane and Seattle, along a northwest route that originates in the Powder River Basin of Montana and Wyoming. There, a seemingly endless supply of the combustible rock would be strip-mined, triggering another array of health and environmental issues. A similar process of mining, handling and transporting already occurs in places around the world -- from [Australia's Hunter Valley](#) to Virginia.

Debate in the United States also reflects the ongoing global concern over continued reliance on fossil fuels, particularly in the rapidly industrializing nations of Asia. As China ships more [solar panels](#) to the U.S., opponents question if we should really be feeding the Chinese more dirty fuel to make those panels.



AN EVERGREEN TOWN

The idea of the coal port is the "entire antithesis" of what this part of the country is about, says Krogh. He wears the standard-issue Pacific Northwest plaid flannel shirt and blue jeans as we stand at an overlook down the street from his office. Below, Bellingham Bay – the northern end of Puget Sound – begins to sparkle with color as gray skies start to clear.

Krogh points to a section of waterfront just south of us, where plans are in the works for the largest brownfield redevelopment project in North America. The revamping of this old pulp and paper mill site is registered under the U.S. Green Building Council's [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design](#) program, an internationally recognized green building certification system.

Even within this Evergreen State, where the last remaining coal-fired power plant is set to shut down by 2025, [Bellingham stands out](#), adds Krogh. In 2007 and 2008, the Environmental Protection Agency named Bellingham its "[Green Power Partner of the Year](#)," and city facilities currently purchase 100 percent of their electricity from renewable resources.

But as the market for coal in the U.S. slows and prices drop – due in part to increased competition from cleaner energy sources – the pressure is on to find new ways to deliver the lucrative commodity to willing customers overseas, explains Thomas M. Power, research professor and professor emeritus of economics at the University of Montana in Missoula. A few East Coast ports handle small volumes of coal, but the West Coast's potential remains untapped.

Now, two Pacific Northwest ports on the drawing board could multiply the total American coal exports to China tenfold: one in Longview, about 100 miles south of Seattle on the Columbia River, and the other at Cherry Point, a few miles north of Bellingham.

When SSA Marine, a Seattle-based cargo-handling company, first came forward last year with plans to build the Cherry Point port, many people were supportive of the idea, including Dan Pike, Bellingham's mayor. "Like most of the country, this area has been hit fairly hard by the great recession, with the construction sector particularly hard hit," he tells HuffPost. "So the thought was, this would help create some construction and other permanent higher wage jobs. At the time, there was no mention of coal."

Pike initially heard that the port would ship out 8 million tons of cargo, predominantly potash and wheat. Several months later, at the end of February this year, SSA Marine unveiled its current plan – which amounts to about six times the earlier cargo figure in coal – along with its new contract with Peabody Energy, the largest coal company in the world.

"At that point, I started to pay close attention," adds Pike.

'JOB KILLER' vs. KILLER POLLUTION

The Cherry Point terminal would eventually provide up to 430 direct jobs and generate another 843 indirect and induced jobs, such as restaurant and health care workers, according to a recently released [study from local economists](#) hired by SSA Marine.

At the same time, the port would likely result in some job and property value losses, notes Hart Hodges, director of the Center for Economics and Business Research at Western Washington University in Bellingham and co-author of the Cherry Point employment study. A separate analysis is currently under way to determine the effect, if any, of increased train traffic on Bellingham's residential and business community. Analysts are looking particularly hard at the redevelopment project, as the railroad currently severs this strip of waterfront from the rest of town.

"I live right on the tracks myself," Hodges tells HuffPost. "If someone said we wouldn't have more trains, it wouldn't break my heart." At least three full and empty coal trains already pass below his back deck daily en route to three Canadian ports.

Still, Hodges acknowledges the importance of jobs to this coastal community. "I'm trying desperately to be very analytical and put as many facts on the table as possible," he says.

One key question: Would blocking the Cherry Point port really keep additional trains off the tracks?

The answer depends on whom you ask. "This cargo is going to find its way to Asia either through Whatcom County or terminals in Vancouver," says Bob Watters, senior vice president of SSA Marine. He suggests the Canadian terminals could expand to export more: "The question is who gets the jobs and tax benefits and stimulation of the economy."

Meanwhile, a recent [investigation by Sightline Institute](#), a nonprofit think tank based in Seattle, determined that British Columbia's coal ports "would not come close to handling the volumes of coal called for by the recent proposals in Washington State" and that "Canadian steelmaking coal is in high demand" and "achieves significantly higher prices than the Powder River Basin coal."

Jeff Jacobs of Bow, Wash., is one of many Whatcom County residents fighting the proposal. Among other advocacy efforts, he planted two Sierra Club anti-coal signs in his front yard. In early October, he noticed that someone had scrawled "Job Killer" on both signs; later someone ripped them down.

Jacobs responded by putting up another. It's bigger and reads, "Big Coal, Big Oil, Killer Pollution."

"They haven't messed with the new one," he tells HuffPost.

DUST, DIESEL AND OTHER DANGERS

When most people think about the health hazards of coal, they focus on the results of its combustion or maybe the notorious black lung disease suffered by coal workers, says Karen Johannesson, professor of earth and environmental studies at Tulane University in New Orleans. Very little attention is paid to the other risks, she tells HuffPost.

Johannesson recalls when she moved to Norfolk, Va., home of what is currently the largest coal export terminal in the U.S., shipping about 28 million tons of the rock annually. "One morning, I went to wipe the fog off my windshield, and it came back completely black," she says. "You can't really escape the coal dust, especially if you're living near the port."

SLIDESHOW: From Coal Pit To Coal Port



[Lambert's Point Coal Terminal](#) in Norfolk is legally permitted to release up to 50 tons of coal dust into the air each year. Local residents have raised concerns about the area's elevated asthma rates, although a link to the fugitive dust that blows off the large stockpiles at the terminal remains unproven. A 1994 British study found that children exposed to coal dust were more likely to [miss school due to respiratory problems](#). Other studies have associated coal dust with conditions such as chronic bronchitis and emphysema.



Coal dust is also a known source of exposure to mercury and other toxic heavy metals. In her own research, Johannesson found **elevated levels of arsenic** in the soil near Lambert's Point.

A study from the University of British Columbia identified a doubling of coal particles near a terminal in Robert's Bank, B.C., about 20 miles from Cherry Point, between 1977 and 1999. The authors concluded that the distribution of **coal particles could harm plants and animals** in the area. According to a separate study, the terminal emits more than 700 tons of coal dust a year, coating local homes, patio furniture and boats.

About **500 pounds of coal dust** is also estimated to blow off each open-top rail car on the trip from the Powder River Basin to the Pacific Coast, according to Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad studies. Because there will be approximately 150 rail cars in each train, that could amount to nearly 40 tons of coal per trip.

Jacobs frequently finds evidence of this on the train tracks by his home. However, he is more worried about diesel exhaust from the trains. "We can definitely smell the diesel exhaust, especially when they are slowing down or charging up," he says. "I've told my two kids that when they smell exhaust, just go inside."

Each coal train is pulled by four or five diesel locomotives. The diesel particulate matter released into the air by each -- as well as by the large ships that would pull in and out of the proposed port -- is among the chief concerns of Whatcom Docs, a group of more than 150 Bellingham-area physicians. They point to hundreds of studies that have linked particulate matter with a **host of health problems**, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, asthma and lung cancer.

"The small, toxic particles left over after the combustion of diesel can go way down deep into the lungs," says Dr. Frank James, a private practice physician in Bellingham and a member of the group. "It impacts the rest of the body as well."

And exposure may occur indirectly -- at the dinner table, for example. Contaminants from diesel exhaust -- including mercury, a neurotoxin that is particularly dangerous to children -- can settle into local waterways and accumulate up the food chain into **fish and other seafood**. Meanwhile, sulfur compounds, soot and other byproducts from coal-fired power plants in Asia are swept into the atmospheric cycle and return to the Pacific Northwest within 10 days. Up to an estimated 30 percent of the mercury in Washington state waters comes from China.

With newer technology and safeguards, at least some of the risks faced by older ports could be avoided at Cherry Point. SSA Marine's Watters tells HuffPost that the company will install **wind fences and watering equipment** to keep coal dust from blowing around at the port. Plans also call for power to be supplied to docked ships in order to reduce the diesel emissions from idling engines.

Dr. James points out a few less-obvious public health consequences that might be more difficult to mitigate. The addition of nearly one train an hour passing through Western cities and towns would increase the risk of collisions, he says, as well as delay emergency vehicles by as much as 12 minutes.

"If you've got a heart attack victim in an ambulance stuck for 6 to 8 minutes behind a train, that can be a life-and-death difference," says Ginny Wolff, a retired physician living in Bow.

Yet another concern is the noise created by the heavy trains and their horns. As Dr. James notes, research has **linked noise** with a variety of health problems, including heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke and sleep deprivation.

Western Washington University's Hodges can attest to the nighttime noise factor. "You can actually get used to a small rumbling going by," he says. "But then there's the rumbling at 3 a.m. that comes with lots of whistles. Some conductors blow their whistle a lot more than others."

'G'BYE BEACH'

Krogh of RE Sources and I cross over a set of railroad tracks on our way to the site of the proposed terminal at Cherry Point. We pass acres of wetlands and forests, some of which have already been cleared by SSA Marine, and eventually emerge in a small gravel lot a few feet from the rocky shoreline. We park the truck next to a barricade spray-painted with "HELLO COAL -- G'BYE BEACH" and step out onto the beach.

"This is why this matters," says Krogh, motioning at the expanse of blue between us and the San Juan and Vancouver islands. The sun has now fully broken through the clouds.

In addition to housing one of the last native Dungeness crab fisheries, Krogh explains that the deepwater trench extending about a mile in front of us is home to half of the Puget Sound herring population. The small fish is a crucial foundation for the food chain that includes Chinook salmon and orca whales, and therefore also a key component of the coastal community's fishery and tourism industries. "Year after year they come back and gather in this spot and have a big herring orgy," he tells me. "Then they hang out until it is time to come to shore and spawn on the eelgrass and kelp."

The **herring stock** has already dropped dramatically in recent years, making it particularly vulnerable to any further threats such as pollution from the vessels that would be using the proposed port.

An oil spill is also an increasing possibility as traffic through the tight coastal channels escalates. "We have pretty vibrant vessel traffic in the state to begin with," says Linda Pilkey-Jarvis, an oil spill expert with the Washington State Department of Ecology. "The port would certainly change the numbers and increase the risk of spills."

The Department of Ecology estimates the addition of nearly 500 annual trips in and out of the port, on top of the approximately 2,700 current crossings through northern Puget Sound.

Pacific herring is just one of the species that could be threatened by an oil spill or coal-related pollution, notes Wayne Landis, director of the Institute of Environmental Toxicology at Western Washington University. Cherry Point also provides a migratory corridor for young salmon and is a significant habitat for seabirds and migratory waterfowl.

WHO REALLY CARES?

In the months ahead, regulatory officials will determine -- with input from stakeholders and the public -- **which health and environmental issues deserve consideration** as they debate the fate of the port. They may decide to restrict the scope of their review to ecological effects in the vicinity of the port, or they could look more broadly at disturbances to both the environment and public health across the state. Experts suggest some fallout that is unlikely to be included: effects on the other side of the globe and to the planet itself.

Power, the Montana economist, acknowledges that China and other Asian countries could obtain coal from elsewhere if the Gateway Pacific Terminal isn't built. But opening the port would increase the supply of coal to these countries "dramatically," he says. "This makes coal cheaper to China. It means they'll burn more of it."

According to a recent analysis by the Sightline Institute, the Gateway Pacific Terminal and the coal burning it would enable could **drive up carbon dioxide emissions more than the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline**: 199 vs. 175 million tons per year. Plans for the latter were recently **postponed by the U.S. State Department**.

Perhaps the greatest fallout from the port would remain unquantifiable. "Washington state has committed to trying to reduce its carbon footprint and phase out the use of coal," says Power. "To turn around now and abandon that position, and become a major coal exporter, represents a serious blow to developing a consensus about doing something in the U.S. about our carbon emissions and global warming."

"Once the port is in place, Washington's congressional delegation will be forced, like our senators from Montana, to fight against anything that restricts the export of coal or regulates carbon," he adds.

The November election – which **saw the defeat of Pike** – may be over, but this political contest rolls on unabated. Opponents of the port continue to hold community meetings, including a visit from environmentalist **Bill McKibben**, while proponents continue to canvass door to door, run ads in local papers and mail additional flyers.

Just before I let him go to watch the University of Montana vs. Montana State University football game, Power shared one last thought: "The thing about human beings is that we are biologically not only capable of enthusiastically competing but also extensively cooperating. And this takes place when we know that competition will lead to the wrong outcome."

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