

There are five other proposed Northwest coal terminals in addition to Longview. Terminals have been proposed in Bellingham and Grays Harbor in Washington, and in Oregon there are proposals for terminals at ports in St. Helens and Boardman and, of course, Coos Bay.

The Boardman proposal, like Longview, is through Australian coal giant Ambre Energy. In addition to Ambre, fellow coal mega-corps Arch Coal (which owns Millennium with Ambre), Peabody Coal and Cloud Peak Energy are working to export coal, or already do, mainly from the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming. Currently that coal is exported through three terminals in Canada. Powder River Basin coal is in demand for its low sulfur content. Climate change activist Bill McKibben has called the basin “one of earth’s great carbon bombs.”

Peabody reportedly has entered into a large coal export contract with the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal project north of Bellingham. Just who has entered into the coal contract with Coos Bay remains unknown, thanks to the nondisclosure agreement. Martin Callery, chief commercial officer for the Port of Coos Bay, says such agreements are common in the transportation industry, from rail to marine to trucking. Because there’s a lot of competition, the companies don’t want their competitors to know what they’re planning, Callery says.

“I don’t think people realized it was going to come this far south,” says Eugene activist Pettygrove. “We thought that the port’s not deep enough, and the rail link was not up until this year. I really think that them fixing the rail link was done to prepare for this project.”

Coal opponents speculate that the companies looking to open up terminals in Oregon are the same ones working on the Washington proposals — Arch, Ambre and Peabody — and are hedging their bets in case those terminals don’t pan out. Cloud Peak Energy, a top exporter of coal through Canada, has several subsidiaries in Oregon: Kennecott Coal Sales, Northern Coal Transportation, Prospect Land and Development and Western Minerals.

Callery says that within the next 90 to 120 days, the Port of Coos Bay will enter into a property-purchase option agreement with “Project Mainstay,” at which point the coal company’s name could become known. The port and “Project Mainstay” are currently in the middle of six months of “due diligence” on the project, he says, which includes everything from looking at port capacity to rail-line capacity. The port also owns the rail line, called the Coos Bay Rail Link (CBRL).

Callery says a “dictating factor” in how much coal would be exported from Coos Bay is the “volume of bulk commodity via the rail system” or, in other words, how many unit trains (that travel from start to finish as one unit) the CBRL can handle. There is no legal limit on how long a freight train can be in the U.S.; they are limited only by their weight and what can pull them. Coal trains often have four diesel-spewing locomotives, two at each end of the train.

Project Mainstay is currently doing a rail capacity study, Callery says. He says the port didn’t choose the largest project, it chose what it considered the best one. Another proposal, “Project Glory,” which the port commission didn’t choose, called to export 26 million metric tons of coal.

Callery says coal isn’t the only commodity Project Mainstay is considering. It would also transport iron ore and mineral products. “There would be a significant number of jobs” at the terminal, the rail carrier and in the maritime industry, Callery says. The port’s export of wood products, long one of its past mainstays, has dropped from five million tons a year to million and half, and jobs dropped with that. But employment numbers are unknown until Mainstay completes its due diligence, he says.

Black lungs

Maps indicate that the coal would be loaded onto trains at the Powder River Basin mines in Montana and Wyoming, taken through Montana into Washington, then through the Columbia Gorge, down the rail line following the I-5 corridor and into Eugene, where the trains would switch rails onto the newly fixed and reopened CBRL.

The CBRL moves west from Eugene toward Florence, then down the coast through Reedsport to Coos

Bay, crossing through forests, past towns and over lakes and rivers on its way. Stevens of the Sierra Club says that for humans, the danger from coal dust is in its mercury, arsenic and lead, which could lead to lung cancer and asthma as well as health issues stemming from the small particulate matter that gets into the lungs.

Lisa Arkin of Beyond Toxics has been working for years on health issues related to train traffic along River Road and in the Trainsong area. Diesel exhaust, like coal dust, is bad for your health. It releases carbon monoxide, sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides and polyaromatic hydrocarbons and their derivatives, Arkin says.

Whatcom Docs, a group of 170 doctors organized against the coal-export terminal in Bellingham, say that diesel particulate matter is associated with increased risk of cancer, pulmonary inflammation and increased heart attacks in adults, and increased asthma and hospital emissions in children.

The doctors say the coal dust from the trains can lead to chronic bronchitis, emphysema, pulmonary fibrosis and environmental contamination through the leaching of toxic heavy metals.

The doctors also have concerns about delayed response times if ambulances are held up by long coal trains at railroad crossings and warn of increased accidents, traumatic injury and death.

Arkin says Union Pacific recently met with a group that included Beyond Toxics, political officials, Lane Regional Air Protection Agency and others to discuss a no-idling policy (UP will turn off a locomotive if it can) to reduce diesel emissions. But UP told the group it can't enforce the policy on other companies using the tracks.

Stevens says the impacts are economic as well. She says coal trains drive away developers along the rail lines and depreciate property values. Coal trains affect the quality of life with noisy, dirty trains chugging through town. And she argues the coal trains congest valuable resources and infrastructure that "we should be using in a way that benefits our economy."

Coal is also a safety issue, Stevens says. The coal dust seeps into the ballast (the rocks under the tracks) and makes it more likely a train could derail.

Callery says coal dust or, as he calls it, "fugitive emissions," was a problem 20 years ago, but now "you simply don't see it." Companies spray the top of the car with a polymer substance that locks in the dust, he says.

Zimmer-Stucky asks, "What happens to that chemical latex when you off-load the coal? Well, it gets burned, too." She says, "That's not a solution."

The aquatic organisms around coal-fired power plants and coal mines aren't the only wet creatures affected by the coal complex. Dan Serres of Columbia Riverkeeper, which has been fighting the coal export terminals along the Columbia River, says the Department of State Lands in December granted the Port of Coos Bay "one of the biggest dredging permits ever issued in the state, and we don't know what the hell it's for."

The dredging, he says, could be for the unknown coal company's terminal, or for the equally controversial and environmentally problematic liquefied natural gas terminal slated for the port. "LNG and coal, neither one of these things are good for Oregon," Serres says.

Callery says the Port of Coos Bay needs to be deepened as the industry changes and vessels get larger. He says the port will benefit the community if it can remain competitive and develop a diversity of cargo base and not depend entirely on wood products. Neither the dredging nor the building of a new terminal will proceed without environmental impact statements and public input, according to Callery. "There are certain benchmark points in the process, where the public and everyone else has an opportunity to comment on the project," Callery says. "There are specific standards that must be met to get permitted."

The dredging "is pretty gnarly in terms of the impact on the bay in Coos County," Serres says. "I don't think they've really done their homework on the impact," he says, pointing out that dredging could harm salmon, other fish and oysters, which would further harm the area's fishing industry.