

closing in on Gateway Pacific

The Campaign to Terminate Coal's Superhighway to Asia

This case study is published as part of the Democracy Center's series of Climate Campaign Profiles. These studies have been produced to gather lessons from climate activism in diverse places and contexts in order to share these with other campaigners and help build the effectiveness of their advocacy work. You can find the full series in the Climate & Democracy section of our website.

By Ben Brouwer

the story

In the last decade a wave of citizen activism - bolstered by concerns about climate change and the health impacts of coal-fired power plants - has combined with dropping natural gas prices to [see plans shelved](#) for 160 new coal plants in the United States. But with more of the dirty fuel still in the ground coal giants like Peabody Energy, Arch Coal and Ambre Energy are looking for new markets. The coal companies are teaming up with banks, rail companies and marine shipping corporations in a race to build up to [six coal export terminals](#) on the Oregon and Washington coasts in the US Pacific Northwest. If built to full capacity the terminals could be used to ship more than [140 million tons](#) of coal each year from the Powder River Basin in Montana and

Wyoming to energy-hungry economies in Asia. By comparison, the greenhouse gas emissions from burning 140 million tons of coal would be [equivalent](#) to more than the annual emissions of approximately 49 million cars in the US.

At present, ports in Canada export a few million tons of US coal to Asia, but new ports need to be built and operations expanded across the coal economy to significantly boost exports. It is those expansions that are the target of a vigorous opposition campaign. Pat Sweeney, Executive Director of the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC), which has been fighting coal mining in the Powder River Basin for decades, explains the fight against these



The planned coal export terminals in the northwest United States would ship coal from mines like this one in the Powder River Basin to markets in Asia. Photo: Paul K. Anderson

coal export schemes as a three-legged stool: “There are the mines, there are the railroads and there are the ports. And there are strategies and opportunities to stop each of these individual pieces.” Sweeney sees hope in this latest campaign: “The game changer here is that this is an export market, not a domestic market issue...and that it’s a new transportation corridor impacting lots of new people.”

In 2011, nine non-profit organizations representing a cross section of the broad movement to stop new coal exports (including WORC) came together in the [Power Past Coal](#) coalition. They realize that if they can knock out one leg of the coal export infrastructure “stool,” then the whole plan topples.

This case study is a snapshot from the ongoing campaign Power Past Coal is waging, and narrows in on just one of the export terminals the campaign is trying to stop: the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal just north of the city of Bellingham, the county seat of Whatcom County in northwest Washington State.

The Gateway Pacific Terminal is being developed by SSA Marine, an international shipping company, of which [Goldman Sachs](#) controls a 49% share. The port is designed to ship up to 48 million tons of coal a year. According to a [contract](#) with Peabody Energy the coal would be mined in the Powder River Basin. Up to [eighteen](#) trains a day (nine loaded, nine returning) would carry the coal on BNSF Railway lines in uncovered rail cars through many of the most densely populated cities and towns in Montana, Idaho and Washington. The additional trains will strain the capacity of the railroad, competing with passenger trains and other cargo carriers, and will bring heightened health and traffic concerns to

rail-side communities from diesel pollution and coal dust blowing off the rail cars. Positioned between the proposed terminal and the Pacific Ocean, Washington’s San Juan Islands would be traversed by an additional 900 passages of the world’s biggest bulk cargo ships each year (approximately 450 empty, 450 full), bringing a heightened risk of shipwrecks or collisions with passenger ferries or oil tankers in the narrow passageways through the islands.

The objective of the campaign is to stop construction of the Gateway Pacific Terminal before it starts. But more broadly, the campaign to stop coal exports is a campaign to conserve the land and water threatened by mining, protect the health and well-being of rail-side communities and port towns, and stop the staggering global climate pollution that would come from burning all of that coal.

the targets

As with any mega infrastructure project in the United States, the developers of the Gateway Pacific Terminal must secure a series of permits and permissions in order to proceed with construction. The decision making points related to each of those permits represent opportunities for the campaigners to halt the project. These include:

Environmental Impact Statement

State and federal laws require that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) be prepared that evaluates the likely effects of the terminal construction and operation. As the terminal’s Environmental Impact Statement is the basis on which all of the other decisions are made, the scope of material it covers is crucially important to organizers. In the case of the Gateway

Pacific Terminal a joint federal-state EIS will be issued, with the US Army Corps of Engineers leading the federal involvement and Whatcom County and the Washington Department of Ecology jointly leading the state involvement.



A coal train cuts through rural Washington State.
Photo: Paul K. Anderson

The opportunity for the public to influence the EIS comes at the ‘scoping’ phase when public hearings are held to determine what categories and breadth of impacts the EIS should review. Both sides are [making their strategies clear](#): SSA Marine asserts that the EIS should only focus on direct impacts at the development site. Power Past Coal, on the other hand, is pushing to get the EIS to cover impacts from the mine sites in Montana, all along the rail corridor, and out the busy shipping lanes through Washington’s San Juan Islands, including the health threat of additional pollution that is blown back across the Pacific Ocean from power plants in Asia. They want the EIS to cover impacts to traffic, emergency services, public health, plants and animals, water quality, fisheries, the climate and more. Scoping hearings are likely to be held by the end of 2012, but at present it hasn’t been decided whether hearings will be held outside of western Washington. Updates on the review process are [available here](#).

The Washington State Commissioner of Public Lands

Peter Goldmark, Washington’s [Commissioner of Public Lands](#), directs the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and is a state-wide elected official. He will decide whether or not to issue a lease for the terminal within the state-held Cherry Point Aquatic Reserve. He was narrowly elected in 2008 as a Democrat on a platform that included a proactive view on climate change. His 2012 [campaign website](#) reads: “The people of Washington State have demanded action on climate change. It’s time to elect a Lands Commissioner who will deliver.” Goldmark is running for re-election in November 2012.

US Army Corps of Engineers

The [Army Corps](#) is the only entity representing the federal government at-large in this decision. The Army Corps will consider permits for filling or degrading 162 acres of wetlands, and construction of a pier in navigable waters. The Army Corps is also responsible for weighing the input of impacted tribal nations, including the Nooksack Tribe and Lummi Nation at the site of the terminal and other tribes along the rail shipping route. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the Columbia River Inter-tribal Fishing Commission have requested the Army Corps review coal shipping projects on the Columbia River and their cumulative impacts on fisheries. Ultimately the Army Corps is not bound to reject the project based on objections from the tribes. As a division of the US military, the Army Corps falls under the political control of the President.

Whatcom County Council

The [County Council](#) consists of seven non-partisan members who will be required to make deci-

sions about shoreline use and development permits in a [quasi-judicial](#) proceeding, meaning they can't have private discussions with constituents about the project, or attend forums that aren't part of the public record. Their decision must be based on the results of the EIS and public comments that are formally submitted during permit hearings. Based on [2011 election results](#), it's not clear how the Council will decide.

the strategy

In the fight to stop a global coal superhighway, 'making it local' has been the guiding theme of the Power Past Coal campaign. The messaging emphasizes the impacts on local economies and neighborhoods; local grassroots organizations have been some of the most important allies; and actions such as forums and rallies that grab attention on the local TV stations have been crucial.

Messaging Strategy: Derailing the "jobs" argument

Power Past Coal and its allies are using messages that discredit the coal backers and redefine the issue around threats to people's health and impacts on the local economy. They're also not shying away from talking about the danger to the global environment posed by building the coal export infrastructure. Beth Doglio, who works for Climate Solutions and is coordinating the Power Past Coal Coalition, attributes part of the campaign's success to a nimble and effective communications team that has reached out to communities across four states. They've reframed what would have been a decision for Whatcom County into an issue that resonates with people living all the way along the rail line to the coal mines. But they're up against formidable and well-heeled messaging opponents.

What the coal supporters are saying: Jobs

"We have a down economy and they're selling jobs." That's how Matt Krogh with RE Sources, Power Past Coal's lead organization in Bellingham, explains his opposition's strategy. Montana's popular Governor Brian Schweitzer has traveled to Washington State - and to China - to advertise his state's coal resources and cajole county officials into backing the export terminals. Back home he talks up coal mining as a source of needed tax revenue and jobs. "We have coal," he told the [Missoula Independent](#). "It creates a lot of jobs. And if it's not produced here, it'll be produced someplace else. Those boilers in Taiwan or Korea, they're either going to burn Indonesian, Australian or Russian coal, or they're going to burn coal [shipped] from the Pacific Northwest, maybe Montana. And I'd like to create jobs...not just mining it; it's jobs reclaiming it, and it's jobs shipping it. Those are all good jobs."



Piles of coal stockpiled at an export terminal in Canada, waiting to be loaded on to ships bound for Asia. Photo: Paul K. Anderson

Out in Washington, SSA Marine has run a carefully calculated campaign to build public support. According to Krogh, SSA Marine started out with a behind-the-scenes approach, talking up an 8 million ton per year grain and dry goods bulk export terminal. They went to the

Governor's office, agency offices, local elected officials and unions, and they got a handful of small-town mayors on board. Then they went public with their plans for what would actually be a 54 million ton terminal, exporting 48 million tons of coal per year at peak capacity. The company hosted a telephone town hall meeting to which nearly 100,000 county residences were invited; they've been running full-page ads in the local newspaper and they hired a canvassing team that has blanketed the county with glossy fliers. They say the terminal and shipping operations would provide ongoing direct employment for [430 people](#) when completed and would provide thousands more direct and indirect jobs during the construction phase. Terminal promoters also promise the potential of [\\$11 million](#) in new revenues for state and local governments.

Messaging Back: The Coal Trains are Coming

For people living in towns or cities along the railroad tracks Matt Krogh says the message is simple: "The call to arms is, 'Stop the coal trains.' Trains have direct, obvious impacts on people's



A loaded coal train passes in front of an inn on the Bellingham waterfront en route to an export terminal in Canada. Home and business owners along the tracks are concerned about the noise, pollution and traffic impacts from up to 18 additional trains each day that would be required to service a new coal terminal planned for just north of Bellingham.

Photo: Paul K. Anderson

lives. People care deeply about trains...really, really big trains with contaminants blowing off of them."

A group of 180 Whatcom County physicians calling itself Whatcom Docs has [raised the alarm](#) about increased health impacts from diesel exhaust pollutants, noise pollution, delays to emergency response vehicles and coal dust. Concerns about coal dust were stirred when BNSF Railway, which would ship the coal, [reported](#) that an average coal car loses from 500 to 2,000 pounds of fine coal particles in its journey from the Powder River Basin to the west coast. The dust is laced with lead, mercury and other toxins. BNSF has since removed this data from its website and denies that coal dust contamination is an issue along its railroads. While it may be relatively easy for rail companies to find ways of containing coal dust, the problems of increased diesel emissions and traffic impacts from the trains remain.

Communitywise Bellingham, another group fighting the export terminal, commissioned an independent [economic analysis](#) of the impacts to Bellingham from the additional 18 trains that would run through the city each day (on top of 14 at present). The study projects a net job loss in Whatcom County due to impacts on the county's overall image and tourism, and from traffic being unable to reach waterfront redevelopment projects that would be physically cut off from downtown for hours each day as the trains passed through. Organizers from Bellingham back to Billings, Montana (near the source of the coal) are pointing out that more coal trains will mean [long waits at train crossings](#). This is especially the case for Montana, Idaho and eastern Washington towns where in some cases, [over 50 new trains a day](#) would be required to ser-

vice the Gateway Pacific Terminal and other proposed coal ports if they were all operating at full capacity.



Power Past Coal campaign organizer Beth Doglio delivers signatures to Washington State Commissioner of Public Lands, Peter Goldmark, calling on him to stop the Gateway Pacific coal export terminal and others planned for coastal waters. Photo courtesy of Power Past Coal

Fishermen are stepping up as important messengers as well. Walter Young, a retired tribal fisherman, [spoke out](#) on local television against the project (as well as a tar sands shipping route in the works that would send more oil tankers through these waters). Jeremy Brown, a Bellingham-based fisherman, joined a [delegation](#) to Public Lands Commissioner Goldmark opposing the coal export scheme. They are talking with credibility about the heightened threat of collisions and oil spills in a sensitive marine ecosystem, as well as the devastating [acidification](#) of the oceans that is being precipitated by carbon dioxide emissions to which coal is an especially guilty contributor.

In the resource rich state of Montana, many people hate the idea of being a “coal colony” for China. Mark Fix is a rancher in southeastern Montana, and an active member of Northern Plains Resource Council, which is an affiliate of WORC. Fix penned an [op-ed](#) pointing out that

“shipping coal to China does nothing for America’s energy independence.” For decades Fix and his neighbors have been successfully fighting the construction of the Tongue River Railroad that would open up access to proposed coal mines. The fact that this railroad would be built on private property in an agriculturally rich valley to ship coal to Asia doesn’t sit well in a part of the country that takes pride in both ranching and property rights.

Ally Strategy: Reaching Across the Northwest

The Power Past Coal coalition was founded by nine core organizations but is now composed of more than 90 supporting organizations that span the spectrum of legal expertise, grassroots

Who’s leading the charge?

- [Power Past Coal](#)
- [Climate Solutions](#)
- [Columbia Riverkeeper](#)
- [Dogwood Initiative](#)
- [Earthjustice](#)
- [Sierra Club](#)
- [RE Sources for Sustainable Communities](#)
- [Washington Environmental Council](#)
- [Western Organization of Resource Councils](#)
- [Wilderness Committee](#)

For more information:

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organizing capacity, and regional and national membership. The coalition shares a website and campaign resources and uses weekly conference calls and occasional face-to-face meetings to set and revise strategy. From Beth Doglio's perspective as one of the campaign coordinators, "the caliber of the staff involved in the campaign is phenomenal. This is a very highly functioning coalition."

Matt Krogh of RE Sources explains that the campaign to stop coal exports hardly ends at the boundaries of the Power Past Coal coalition. "There's a broad group of people who are self-identifying niches in the ecosystem of resistance, and fitting themselves into it," he says, talking about dozens of other activists across the Northwest who have put their passion into helping stop the coal trains. For example, the [Sightline Institute](#) and [Coal Train Facts](#) have stepped up to create libraries of background information and answers to frequently asked questions on coal exports. [Northern Plains Resource Council](#) is leading community forums and organizing along the rail corridor in Montana. The [Western Environmental Law Center](#) and [Montana Environmental Information Center](#) are highlighting water pollution from coal mining in Montana. [Communitywise Bellingham](#) is funding a series of independent economic and environmental

impact studies. [Protect Whatcom](#) and [Safeguard the South Fork](#) are organizing county residents outside of the Bellingham urban core. [Coal-Free Bellingham](#) has launched an initiative drive for a "Community Bill of Rights" that would, among other things, prohibit the transport of coal through the City of Bellingham. [Whatcom Docs](#) has played a crucial role in bringing the credibility of the medical profession to the debate about coal train impacts. [No Coal Northwest](#) teamed up with 350.org and others to organize a week of direct action protests in Montana's state capital.

Action Strategy:

Communication Tools

More than 25 community forums have been held all along the rail corridor, from the eastern Montana city of Billings to the densely populated Puget Sound corridor in Washington, to let people know about the coming onslaught of coal trains and get the issue in front of the media. Community forums and the wide coalition of organizers have served to ensure a steady stream of newspaper, radio and TV [coverage](#) of the issue, a crucial mechanism for informing the general public and keeping pressure on decision makers.

Rallies

In June 2011 RE Sources organized a [rally](#) in Bellingham featuring Bill McKibben, a widely known climate activist and co-founder of 350.org. The rally attracted a crowd of over 1,000 people, and according to Beth Doglio, "really fired up a lot of people" early in the campaign. Matt Krogh points out that bringing McKibben or another leader in the climate movement, like Naomi Klein or



Organizers in Bellingham brought out more than 1,000 people early in the campaign for a rally featuring Bill McKibben, renowned climate activist and author. Photo: Paul K. Anderson

James Hansen, back to the Northwest would serve as an effective tactic to reach large groups of people in urban areas who aren't directly impacted by coal trains. Bellingham organizers convened a second [protest](#) in March 2012 in lead-up to an informational meeting about the Environmental Impact Statement process.

Petitions

Organizers put more than 40,000 signatures on the desk of Commissioner Goldmark in March 2012, bringing [public pressure](#) to bear on his decision about coal terminal leases. He's not expected to be faced with a decision until the Final Environmental Impact Statement is completed—possibly by late 2013—but insuring that he hears opposition voices early and often is crucially important.

Legal Challenges

RE Sources [filed a lawsuit](#) in December 2011 alleging that SSA Marine violated the Clean Water Act by clearing land and grading the site of the proposed coal terminal without the correct permits. In Montana, organizers successfully used legal tactics to force permit review for the Tongue River Railroad [back to square one](#). At a different proposed export terminal in Longview, Washington, the Power Past Coal team appealed the County Commission's unanimous decision to approve a coal export terminal and in the process revealed that the [developer had been lying](#) to the public and County Commission about the scale of their project (they had been keeping significant expansion plans under wraps). The CEO of the export terminal resigned, and they pulled their proposal (only to re-apply several months later).

Economic Analysis

Thomas Power, a Montana-based resource economist, took a close look at assertions from Governor Schweitzer and others that "holding back Powder River Basin coal from Asian markets won't have any impact on greenhouse gas emissions." He says that, "To the contrary, building coal export terminals in Washington State and elsewhere on the West Coast will ultimately lower coal prices, increase coal consumption, and over the long term create incentives towards [more coal use](#) than would be the case if these terminals are not built."

By showing that coal trains running through Bellingham would have a potential net negative effect on jobs, Communitywise Bellingham's independent economic analysis of Gateway Pacific Terminal has undermined SSA Marine's assertions that the terminal will only bring prosperity.

Public Comments

With public forums and other communication tools, organizers have effectively laid the groundwork to deliver thousands of public comments opposing the Gateway Pacific Terminal when Commissioner Goldmark, the Army Corps and Whatcom County reach that phase of the permitting process.



Opponents of the Gateway Pacific coal export terminal march in the town of Bellingham, Washington. Photo: Paul K. Anderson

Direct Action

Groups outside the Power Past Coal coalition have organized non-violent direct action against the coal export plans. In December 2011 a dozen Occupy Bellingham protesters [locked themselves together](#) over BNSF railroad tracks in an act of civil disobedience that stopped trains for three hours. In May 2012 thirteen protesters were arrested and later released with misdemeanor charges for [stopping a coal train](#) in British Columbia. No Coal Northwest worked with 350.org and other groups to stage a [series of sit-ins and protests in Montana](#) in August 2012. 23 people were arrested when they refused to leave the state capitol building.

Timeline

June 2011: Rally in Bellingham opposing the Gateway Pacific Terminal draws more than 1,000 people and lays the foundation for local opposition to the proposed coal export facility.

March 2012: Power Past Coal delivers 40,000 signatures on a petition preemptively calling on the Washington State Commissioner of Public Lands to turn down the Gateway Pacific Terminal and other proposed coal shipping terminals.

March 2012: Developers of the Gateway Pacific Terminal submit application for construction permits, initiating a public review process that will likely last more than one year.

August 2012: Protests in Montana target leasing of coal tracts for export.

Lessons

The proposal to ship more US coal overseas is being fought in the midst of a flurry of export infrastructure development plans in North America: the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline would ship crude from Canada to the US Gulf Coast for export; the Northern Gateway Pipeline would ship tar sands through a port on Canada's northern British Columbia coastline; expansions to the Trans Mountain Pipeline in Canada would send additional oil tankers through Washington's San Juan Islands on the way to the Pacific Ocean; liquid natural gas (LNG) export terminals are planned for Oregon and Louisiana; new coal export terminals are under consideration for the Mississippi River and the US eastern seaboard. The lessons campaigners are uncovering in their fight to stop the Gateway Pacific Terminal will undoubtedly apply in these other battles, and more to come.

Focus first on local impacts

While the backers of coal exports have an international reach and are working within the context of an international energy market, the best place to stop their plans is at the local level. At every mine site and every place the railroad crosses a road or runs through a neighborhood, people will feel the impact of coal getting shipped to Asia. The campaign to stop coal exports is successfully forcing decision-makers to pay attention to those local impacts on businesses and health.

While there is a risk that this local focus will push rail and terminal operators to buy off their opposition by paying to mitigate the local pollution, traffic and noise complaints, focusing on local impacts - as opposed to global ones - is still likely to be a far more potent argument against coal export proponents.

Make the connection to climate change, global economy

While local arguments are key to stopping coal exports, the Gateway Pacific plan is part of a much larger global climate crisis and debate about coal and its role as a future energy source. Train cars brimming with coal are a stark illustration of where catastrophic climate change comes from, and in that regard they're not only a call to action for local activists but an opportunity to place the subject of climate change, and the discussion about how to stop it, very visibly in the national discourse.

Furthermore, as activists argued strenuously in the [fight to stop Keystone XL](#), exporting fossil fuels does nothing to build American energy security, and in fact it strengthens America's economic competitors. Pat Sweeney questions the political economics of coal exports: "This coal is going to our economic competitors in Asia markets at a very cheap price. Is that a good long term economic strategy for this country?" Importantly, campaigners are point-

ing out that the infrastructure investments that come with fossil fuel export schemes only help to ensure continued global dependence on artificially cheap fossil fuels. The devastating climate pollution from burning those fuels comes at a time when climate science dictates that we must change course.

Undermine the aura of inevitability

Matt Krogh points out that "people should be scared of this project, and also understand that they can stop it. You have to undermine the aura of inevitability." Developers of massive fossil fuel export infrastructure projects succeed in part by riding a wave of inevitability that they create. Developers may offer to make small concessions or alterations, but they never cede a project may be stopped outright. The act of simply informing concerned citizens that there is a way to stop the project outright is an important step that opponents of coal export schemes must take.

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Read on

[Coal export: The greenhouse gas impact of exporting coal from the West Coast](#), Sightline Institute, by Thomas Power, July 2011

[Heavy traffic ahead: Rail impacts of Powder River Basin coal to Asia by way of Pacific Northwest terminals](#), Western Organization of Resource Councils, July 2012

[Whatcom View: RE Sources disputes port position on Bellingham coal trains](#), *Bellingham Daily Herald*, Bob Ferris, August 2011

[Guest column: Tongue River Railroad not in nation's best interest](#), *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, by Mark Fix, January 2012

[Coal export: Pleas of impotence won't wash](#), Climate Solutions, by KC Golden, September 2011

[News and updates regarding coal exports and Gateway Pacific Terminal](#), Coal Train Facts

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Founded in San Francisco in 1992, The Democracy Center works globally to help citizens understand and influence the public decisions that impact their lives. Through a combination of investigation and reporting, advocacy training, and leading international citizen campaigns, we have worked with social and environmental justice activists in more than three-dozen countries on five continents. As The Democracy Center begins its third decade, a special emphasis of our work is strengthening citizen action on the global climate crisis and helping citizens challenge the power of corporations.