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## **Hauling Coal through Montana to Feed China's Growing Energy Appetite**

The consumption of coal in the United States has stabilized and is likely to decline in coming years. About 94 percent of the coal consumed in the United States is used to generate electricity. But burning coal has always been the source of serious air pollution problems and coal-fired electric generators have become more and more expensive to build and operate because of the increasingly stringent restrictions on those toxic emissions. While politicians from coal states have howled every time the US Environmental Protection Agency has forced reductions of those pollutants, EPA has consistently documented the reductions in premature deaths associated with the cleaner air that results, projecting that 230,000 lives will be saved each year by 2020 when the most recent proposed limits on coal combustion emissions are fully in place.

As a result of these costs associated with burning coal, the share of our electricity coming from coal has been steadily declining. Back in 1988 we got about 60 percent of our electricity from coal. Now it is less than 45 percent as we have turned to cleaner sources and we, our water, and our forests are healthier because of that.

American coal producers, including the coal companies operating in Montana and Wyoming, see the writing on the wall and have begun exploring the growing demand for energy in Asia, especially China, to offset the stagnating or declining demand for coal in the US. Two new coal ports on have been proposed in the state of Washington, supported by the two largest coal companies in the US as well as in the Powder River Basin of Montana and Wyoming.

The initial combined planned capacity of these two new coal ports is less than 50 million tons per year, but the coal companies supporting their construction hope to

ultimately expand that capacity to as much as 140 million tons per year, most of it coming from the vast coal reserves of Wyoming and Montana.

If these coal mining companies are successful in pursuing their ambitions in Asian coal markets, this huge volume of coal would have to be shipped by rail across much of Montana, passing through many Montana cities and towns, both large and small. Some of the coal would pass through Billings. Other coal trains would join that main line in Laurel just to the west of Billings. From there the coal trains could travel northeast on the BNSF tracks through Great Falls and across the divide to Whitefish and on through Libby to Sandpoint, Idaho. Alternatively the coal trains could use the Montana Rail Link southern route through Livingston, Bozeman, Helena, and Missoula before crossing into Idaho and converging with the northern rail route in Sandpoint.

To ship another 140 million tons of coal out of Wyoming and Montana to the proposed ports in Washington would require about 30 loaded coal trains, 125 cars long, to cross Montana each day of the year. Another 30 unloaded coal trains would have to return to be reloaded. That is 60 trains, each a mile and a third long, passing through our cities and rural areas each day, two or three such trains passing through during each hour of the day. If the trains are split evenly between the northern and southern routes, the coal trains would pass through our cities and towns a little more than once every hour.

In urban areas with street grade crossings, where the trains have to slow down, it could take the trains over 6 minutes to clear the crossings, much longer if the train is forced to stop. Individual streets could be blocked for at least 6 minutes out of every hour of the day. As the coal trains navigate across 10 to 15 miles of urban and suburban areas, it could take a big chunk of an hour to complete the crossing. This will not be just an inconvenience. It will also present safety problems as emergency vehicles

are delayed or emergency evacuations blocked. Some urban neighborhoods, like Missoula's Rattlesnake Valley, have only one or two access roads. Ultimately, investments would have to be made to eliminate street grade rail crossings in urban areas and on crucial rural roads simply to assure emergency entrance and exit.

There would also be serious pollution problems. BNSF Railroad, which would carry this coal to the west coast ports, is worried about the coal dust pollution associated with such coal trains. It estimates that 100,000 to 1 million pounds of coal are lost, mostly as coal dust, from each unit train as it makes its trip. At the lower end of that estimated loss, 30 coal trains a day would be releasing 3 million pounds of coal dust each day and a billion pounds of coal dust a year. BNSF is primarily concerned about the impact of this coal dust on the stability of the rail bed because the coal dust clogs the gravel ballast on which the rails and ties sit and prevents water from draining away. This can lead to derailments and much higher rail bed maintenance costs. It can also lead to environmental and health problems for those living along the rail line.

BNSF proposed strict limits on the coal dust emissions from coal trains and regular monitoring of that pollution. The electric utilities who were shipping the coal objected and last month the federal Surface Transportation Board rejected BNSF's proposed regulations as unreasonable. BNSF has to go back to the drawing boards on how to control the coal dust pollution being released by these trains.

While some will celebrate the jobs, income, and tax revenue associated with increased coal mining, other will face the costs associated with the mining, transportation, and burning of this dirtiest of all of our major energy supplies.