

Coal dust-up

Metro Vancouver opposes coal shipments along Fraser River estuary

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 12, 2013

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A Metro Vancouver committee voted narrowly to oppose Thursday coal shipments along the Fraser River, following a lengthy debate over the economics of coal projects versus the environmental and health risks associated with coal dust.

Directors on the region's environment and parks committee voted 6-5 to send a "public statement" to Port Metro Vancouver by opposing coal shipments along the Fraser River estuary, other than at the existing Robert's Bank terminal in Delta.

The move, which still has to go before the Metro Vancouver board later this month, follows applications by Port Metro for air-quality permits for a \$200-million expansion at Neptune Bulk Terminals in North Vancouver, as well as a proposal for Fraser Surrey Docks to export thermal coal mined in the western U.S. to produce electricity in Asia. Neptune Bulk Terminals already has its permit, but the move could affect what happens at Fraser Surrey.

This is the latest example of the push and pull between B.C.'s booming resource sector and urban sensibilities in the Lower Mainland.

Pressure from Ottawa for B.C. to build pipelines to carry oil and gas to tankers on the B.C. coast is opposed by a clear majority of Metro residents. Coal has now become the latest resource target, with city councils, health authorities, physicians and environmentalists joining forces in demanding more information on coal dust, diesel fumes and air quality issues.

The province claims the resource sector is needed to create jobs and boost the economy, but the opposition argues the benefits often outweigh the risks when it comes to the environment and public health.

See <http://www.bnsf.com/customers/what-can-i-ship/coal/coal-dust.html> and conversely http://seattletimes.com/html/localnews/2020694792_coaltrainsdustxml.html -CJK

Coal expansion, for instance, has been touted to help secure Metro Vancouver's role as North America's largest coal export hub, while creating jobs across the region. But some directors, including Richmond Coun. Harold Steves, argued the economy shouldn't come at the expense of health and the environment, citing a Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway study that found "roughly" 225 kilograms of coal dust can be lost from each train car during transit.

Kevin Washburn, of Voters for Action on Climate Change - described as a group of apolitical volunteers opposed to coal expansion - earlier told the committee that it is likely barges lose a similar amount of coal dust on their way to Texada Island, and urged Metro to take a strong stance against coal and ensure the public is consulted.

"It's only fair the public has a say on the decisions that have a big impact on their future," Washburn said. "There's intense pressure to create pathways through the U.S. to Asia. We're the path of least resistance."

A Metro staff report suggested that while significant concerns have been raised about the potential environmental impacts of increased coal terminal activity, regional economic benefits also need to be considered.

Roger Quan, Metro's air quality policy division manager, said while the "train has left the station" regarding Neptune Bulk Terminals, Metro could still wield influence on a permit for Fraser Surrey Docks with certain conditions to ensure emission levels are met, along with more public consultation.

He noted the regional district will also explore whether it has the jurisdiction to require coal-toting trains and barges to cover their cargo while it's being transported in the region.

However, Quan said that while Metro works collaboratively with neighbouring regional districts, such as the Fraser Valley and Squamish-Lillooet on air quality, its jurisdiction is limited to the terminals within its region and it has no control over the coal once it leaves the dock for (storage facility) Texada Island, which falls within the Powell River Regional District.

"The port authority could make that requirement," Quan said, but added: "This does need to be a collaborative review process."

Duncan Wilson, Port Metro vice-president of corporate responsibility, maintains the port has no control over the commodities exported through B.C. or Canada, but said the port is willing to work with Metro Vancouver, including on the possibility of requiring covers for coal on trains and barges.

Wilson said the port will require that Fraser Surrey do additional consultation on the project after receiving a "tremendous amount of feedback."

"We take what our local governments say very seriously," he said.

A number of Metro Vancouver municipalities, including Delta, Surrey, White Rock, New Westminster and Vancouver have sought information from Port Metro Vancouver on the potential effects of the coal expansion at Fraser Surrey Docks.

Vancouver has also requested that city staff report back on a bylaw to prevent the expansion of or creation of new, coal export infrastructure within the city.

Metro directors agreed Thursday to back a health impact assessment, as suggested by the Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health authorities, and ask Port Metro for more information on its review processes for permit applications and new coal-handling infrastructure at Neptune Terminals and Fraser Surrey Docks.

Burnaby's Sav Dhaliwal said he would have preferred to have seen an analysis of the air quality impacts related to coal expansion before Metro voted to send a letter of opposition to the port. He, along with Surrey Coun. Barbara Steele, Langley's Bob Long and Gayle Martin and North Vancouver District's Mike Little opposed the motion.

Little argued those port jobs are crucial to the region. "I would hate to see those disappear to another region because the demand is going to be met somewhere," he said. "We should be trying to secure those jobs for the Lower Mainland."

Steves said there was no point in asking Metro Vancouver for more information on health effects because the port would likely approve the project before responding.

"This one really irks me. What stage of the game do we put forward an opposition to the expansion on Fraser River?" he said. "They're not going to talk to us, the port is sole judge, jury and executioner. It's wonderful. "

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