

## Exporting Pollutants: No way to reduce a carbon footprint

Guest Opinion: Puget Sound's health is at risk if Washington becomes the fossil fuel gateway to Asia. President Obama says he's open to "better ideas." Time for state leaders to give him some.

By Stephan Michaels and Fred Felleman

**There was much ado** over President Barack Obama's long awaited climate speech this past month, which garnered praise for its laudable ambitions to reduce carbon pollution, and legitimate criticisms for its striking ironies. The most glaring omission was the president's failure to mention the climatic effects of exporting U.S. coal to Asia.

That oversight came just one week after the Acting Chief of Regulatory Programs for The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers testified before Congress that the Corps would neither study the effects of burning American coal in Asia nor the cumulative impacts from three coal ports being proposed for the Pacific Northwest. The acting chief maintained that those significant impacts "are outside the Corps' control and responsibility."

The president's speech and the testimony of a high ranking Army Corps official beg the question: Does the Obama Administration actually think the United States can reduce its carbon footprint by exporting its pollutants?

**First, the Corps' interpretation** of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is disputable, especially considering that two of the coal terminals proposed for Washington State are on the Columbia River and would result in increased shipping traffic.

NEPA actually authorizes the broadest review of impacts from such massive projects, including cumulative effects from associated endeavors such as transporting explosive crude from Canada and North Dakota through Northwest communities by rail and waterway.

No surprise. Taking the narrow view has long been a hallmark of the Corps, as documented in the five-part series by Washington Post writer Michael Grunwald, including "[For Oil Projects, Corps' Answer is Almost Always 'Yes'](#)" (9/13/2000).

While the Corps claims that international shipping is also outside its purview, it must review the impacts of the enormous bulk carriers — twice the size of oil tankers allowed to call on Puget Sound and lacking their tug escorts or double hull requirements — as they diesel through Washington and U.S. waters. These bulk carriers have the worst accident record of all cargo vessels.

Given the Corps' dismal track record when it comes to conducting environmental analysis — it has yet to produce the Environmental Impact Statement for BP's refinery dock expansion that was required by the Ninth Circuit Court eight years ago — all eyes now turn to Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, Peter Goldmark, the state's commissioner of public lands and head of its Department of Natural Resources, and Washington's Department of Ecology to fill this void.

**The governor and the ecology department have clear authority** over impacts to the marine environment associated with the unprecedented onslaught of fossil fuel infrastructures being proposed for Washington state. And any enterprise seeking to build a dock will also need a permit from Goldmark's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Indeed, DNR has an important card to play in the coal export debate. The proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal (GPT) at Cherry Point is surrounded by DNR's Cherry Point Aquatic Reserve, whose management plan calls for the restoration of the genetically unique herring stock found there.

At full buildout, GPT estimates it will require approximately 487 bulk carriers to ship 48-million tons of coal across the Pacific each year. These high-risk vessels would be competing for passage with oil tankers and other vessel traffic through the already congested shipping lanes around the San Juan Islands. How this impacts the risk of an oil spill is the subject of a current EPA-funded collaborative study hosted by the [Puget Sound Harbor Safety Committee](#).

But as early as 1999, [a DNR-commissioned study](#) recognized that increased vessel traffic from the BP Refinery, less than a mile from GPT, "will inevitably increase the risk of an oil spill," and "if such a spill were to occur ... the impact to Cherry Point herring could be catastrophic." That was the conclusion before anyone understood the full scale of GPT and that the commodity in question would be coal.

Endangered southern resident killer whales subsist on endangered Chinook salmon that, in turn, depend on forage fish like the already decimated herring population at Cherry Point.

**While the Seattle media recently** afforded extensive coverage to transient orcas arriving in Puget Sound, and also to the great success of the once-orphaned "Springer," the orca who just gave birth to her first calf, those stories should be overshadowed by the dire status of our resident killer whales. The Center for Whale Research, [recently reported](#) that only 82 southern, resident orcas remain in J, K and L pod populations, their lowest number since 2001. Significantly expanding commercial traffic to export fossil fuel would be an irresponsible contribution to our resident orcas' demise and, ultimately, to global pollution.

In concluding his climate speech, Obama said he was "open to all sorts of new ideas, maybe better ideas" to combat threats from climate changing pollutants. Gov. Inslee and Commissioner Goldmark, that's your invitation to help the Obama administration evaluate the combined impacts and prevent the potential disaster of allowing Washington's waterways to become the fossil fuel gateway to Asia.



Puget Sound's orca population is at its lowest level in 12 years

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