

https://missoulian.com/news/opinion/columnists/article_35581526-9b8d-5f7d-9f45-881bc1af181b.html

Guest column

It's time for the Tongue River Railroad to die

NICK ENGELFRIED

Oct 4, 2015

Some bad ideas take a long time to die.

The Tongue River Railroad has been in the proposal stages for more than 30 years. Originally intended to haul coal from Montana and Wyoming to Midwestern power plants, the latest version proposes to transport coal from the controversial Otter Creek Coal Mine to the existing rail network that crosses Montana and eventually provides access to West Coast export terminals. The project has been mired in false starts, controversies and a debate over how, exactly, building a new railroad to export Montana coal overseas would benefit our state. The Tongue River Railroad deserved to die long ago.

Unfortunately, it isn't dead yet. In fact, the TRR just made it through a major part of the review process that will help federal regulators decide whether to give it a construction permit. The public comment period on the project's draft environmental impact statement wrapped up on Sept. 23, after an unusually long 150 days. During the five-month comment period, thousands of Montanans weighed in to express concerns.

People are also reading...

1 UPDATED: Body of missing Missoula mountain climber found

2 Opt-Out Signal Honored

Workers losing housing as former Izaak Walton Inn, now called LOGE, set

to close

3 Why ex-Grizzlies head coach Bobby Hauck took Illinois defensive coordinator job

4 'Terrifying': Federal agents raid Missoula man's home, no arrest made

Here in Missoula, the City-County Air Quality Advisory Council and Air Pollution Control Board both raised concerns about health impacts from increased coal train traffic, which would occur when trains using the Tongue River Railroad feed onto the existing rail line that passes through western Montana. Building the TRR threatens to contribute to air and noise pollution and delays at grade-level street crossings in Missoula and other towns.

After the health agencies spoke up, the Missoula County Commission sent its own letter to federal regulators expressing similar concerns. Nine Missoula-area state legislators signed a letter urging that impacts on communities in their districts be considered more fully before the TRR can move forward. And on Sept. 21, Missoula's City Council passed a resolution urging federal decision-makers not to approve the TRR. The city resolution passed overwhelmingly with 10 votes in favor, one abstention and only a single no vote.

Thousands of individuals spoke out against the Tongue River Railroad, too. This spring and summer, grassroots organizations 350-Missoula and Blue Skies Campaign collected over 4,400 comments from people in Missoula who want to see this misguided project stopped. That's roughly equivalent to one out of every 20 people in the greater Missoula area. Comments expressed concerns about effects of increased coal train traffic and coal combustion, including localized air pollution, noise from trains and climate change.

But it's not just here in Missoula that people are speaking out against the TRR. Federal regulators received more than 110,000 comments opposing the project from individuals scattered over a wide area. And on the same day that Missoula's City Council passed its resolution, the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council voted

unanimously to oppose the Tongue River Railroad, citing concerns that it would damage the tribe's resources and way of life. If anyone would understand the true negative impacts of this project, it's residents of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, who live just across the Tongue River from the proposed railroad and Otter Creek Mine.

The TRR would damage tribal resources and private ranchland in the Tongue River Valley, lead to increased coal train traffic through towns like Missoula, and worsen climate change by dumping more coal on the international market. Thousands of Montanans have spoken out against it during the official comment period. Now it's up to the U.S. Surface Transportation Board, the federal body that permits new railroads, to decide if the TRR moves forward.

Let's hope the STB says "no" and stops this bad idea, which should have died a long time ago.

Nick Engelfried of Missoula is an organizer with Blue Skies Campaign and 350-Missoula.



 Opt-Out Signal Honored