

Saying “No” to Coal Trains along the Bay to Oakland

From Australia to Germany to the Pacific Northwest, environmentalists are fighting plans for new terminals shipping greenhouse-gas-producing coal to Asia and South America. This growing “keep it in the ground” movement is seeing success. In the latest in a string of rejected proposals, on May 9 the federal government turned thumbs down plans for the Gateway Pacific Terminal just north of Bellingham, Washington.

The East Bay is another battleground. A bulk shipping terminal is being built at the closed Oakland Army Base in West Oakland, on public land and with \$242 million of California taxpayers’ funds. The developer has gone back on a promise not to ship coal. The terminal is being financed by Utah coal mining interests seeking a market abroad, since cheap natural gas and pollution regulations have decimated demand in the US.

Aside from being a major cause of global warming, coal poses pollution threats to the Bay if the proposed terminal is built. Each week, a dozen or more 100-car coal trains could rumble along the aging Bay-side railroad tracks. According to Baykeeper, each open coal car would shed from 500 pounds to a ton of dust on its journey, with additional discharges during storage and loading. Baykeeper maintains that promises to ship in covered cars are empty – no coal is shipped that way, because heat buildup could cause explosions.

Coal dust contains arsenic, lead, and other toxins harmful to fish, birds, and those who eat them – including people. Coal dust also would blow into low-income communities along the rails, including Richmond, West Berkeley, Emeryville, and West Oakland. Coal dust is linked to asthma, emphysema, and heart disease – already a problem in those communities. Also potentially affected – Bay Trail users, parks like Berkeley’s Aquatic Park, and sports fields like those just east of the tracks in Albany.

Local governments and citizens throughout the East Bay are up in arms. Congresswoman Barbara Lee, local state representatives, Alameda County, and 11 East Bay cities including Albany, Berkeley, El Cerrito, and Richmond oppose the shipments, also citing dangers of collisions and derailments. Labor unions and myriad environmental groups, including 350.org, Baykeeper, Earthjustice, and Sierra Club, oppose the coal terminal. (See list here.) Sunflower Alliance maintains a detailed archive here.

What you can do:

- **Most critical: Tell the Oakland City Council to fight the planned coal shipments.** The Council is scheduled to vote at a special, one-item meeting Monday, June 27. Even if you don't live in Oakland, contact City Council members urging them to block the coal shipments. Email addresses and sample emails are here.
- **Support California Senate Bills SB 1277 and 1279**, introduced by East Bay State Senator Loni Hancock. These bills would require an environmental impact report on effects of coal before the Oakland terminal could be built, and prohibit use of state funds to build future coal terminals near disadvantaged communities. Send support letters by email via <http://sd09.senate.ca.gov/contact>. Or mail them to Senator Loni Hancock, 1515 Clay Street, Suite 2202, Oakland, CA 94612, or fax (510) 286-3885.
- **Tell Governor Jerry Brown to oppose the Oakland terminal**, putting muscle behind his recent statement at the Vatican: that to avoid climate disaster, 90% of coal must stay in the ground. Email at <https://govnews.ca.gov/gov39mail/mail.php>, mail Governor Jerry Brown c/o State Capitol, Suite 1173, Sacramento, CA 95814; phone 916-445-2841; fax 916-558-3160.
- **Support groups fighting the coal trains and sign up to be notified of their action alerts, events, and petitions.** Engaged groups include 350.org, Baykeeper, and Earthjustice. No Coal in Oakland has many background documents and lists events. The Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign; petition here.

