Washington is being inundated with proposals to ship coal and oil through our rail lines and ports. Why? As the U.S. demand for coal falls, coal companies are eyeing West Coast ports to export Powder River Basin coal so it can be burned for fuel overseas. Two of the largest coal export terminals in North America could wind up in Washington at Cherry Point, near Bellingham, and Longview. And the oil industry is calling for six new oil-by-rail expansion projects in Washington along the Columbia River in Grays Harbor and at all five Puget Sound refineries.

BIG PROJECTS, BIGGER COSTS
Coal and oil companies want you to believe that the economic benefits of their proposals outweigh the environmental costs. But these projects would reap economic benefits mostly for coal and oil companies while hurting other Washington industries such as grain exports, intermodal exports, passenger trains, fishing and tourism. In addition to harming the local economy, these proposals would saddle taxpayers with billions of dollars in costs for necessary capital improvement projects to improve rail congestion—congestion created by coal and oil train traffic.

The congestion comes with its own financial costs. A recent study by the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC), found that Seattle’s main rail line could experience up to 85 additional minutes every day of gate down time at train crossings, which would cripple the movement of local goods and services. The global demand for coal is declining, and the world’s oil reserves are shrinking—yet the companies behind Pacific Northwest coal and oil proposals want us to invest heavily in infrastructure for their losing prospects.

STUCK IN TRAFFIC
Rail congestion lies behind many of the anticipated economic impacts. As coal and oil companies send more dirty fuel overseas, rail lines between the Powder River Basin and Northwest ports have been stretched to capacity. According to a study by the Western Organization of Resource Councils, if all of the Northwest’s proposed coal export facilities operate at full capacity, coal trains alone could “reach between 47 and 63 trains per day in 10 years.” Add in BNSF trains bringing Bakken oil from North Dakota to the Northwest, and congestion increases to an additional 22 trains every day.

The Pacific Northwest has a proud tradition of pioneering sustainable economic activity. Increasing our regional dependency on coal and oil exports will reverse that vision. Our community must choose between propping up the companies behind financially shaky coal and oil exports, and continuing to champion regional development strategies that benefit our diverse economic sectors.
OFF THE RAILS

As coal and oil trains clog the rails, people experience deteriorating service, longer transit times, and higher freight and equipment costs:

- Rail congestion makes it harder for Northwest ports to compete with Southern California for intermodal exports. BNSF has already reduced its intermodal rail service to make room for more coal and oil trains.4

- Farmers are taking a hit as grain cars sit on the tracks waiting for a turn. Right now, the Northwest is where most grain comes for shipping to Asian markets. That could change.

- Amtrak and Sound Transit have experienced massive delays and even train cancellations. Passengers have been held up between stops for hours as coal and oil trains receive priority.5

COAL AND OIL WIN; COMMUNITIES AND TAXPAYERS LOSE

If these proposals go through, the Western Organization of Resource Councils estimates that necessary upgrades to infrastructure could cost billions of dollars,6 including:

- Millions in state and local government dollars for mitigation, litigation, and debt related to rail-related upgrades and expansions

- The cost to add double- and triple-tracks to hundreds of miles of rail lines

- Funding for upgrades to bridges, tunnels and highway crossings

- Installing new rail by-passes in bottlenecks

Heavy train traffic will also hit local economies. Businesses along rail lines will be cut off from their customers, deliveries and service routes. Transit times will increase as more frequent rail crossings hold up cars, mass transit, bikes and pedestrians.

In addition to having a negative impact on local economies, these holdups have a specific financial cost. According to the Puget Sound Regional Council, to improve congestion, we’ll need new overpasses and underpasses for 29 crossings in the Puget Sound area alone.7 In some cases, a single crossing could cost tens of millions of dollars to build.

The economic picture is clear: coal and oil exports are a financial train wreck for our local and regional business communities. It’s time to move beyond coal and oil.

ENDNOTES

3 Ibid
6 Western Organization of Resource Councils, “Heavy Traffic Still Ahead.”