

Montana Coal Export

Op Ed

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Imagine that you are a cattle rancher in Eastern Montana. Your family has been on the same plot of land for the last four generations, but now your land is threatened. In an unfortunate circumstance, your land happens to be close to the newly proposed Otter Creek Coal Mine. Even worse, Arch Coal owns the mineral rights under your ranch. The development of the mine could destroy the aquifer of the entire area, and in addition, it may create fissures and cracks along specific areas that are being mined.

In an **unfortunate** series of events Ellen Pfister, whose land is over the Bull Mountain Mine, a mine similar to the proposed one at Otter Creek, has experienced these results. Ellen has said that her, "biggest worry is that mining could permanently damage her water supplies - a crucial necessity on a ranch set in central Montana's arid landscape of sandstone, sage brush and ponderosa pine trees stunted by drought" (Brown). In addition to the threat of the well running dry, "giant fissures have appeared where portions of the mine collapsed after coal was removed" (Brown). Farmers, who will be affected in more ways than the direct effects of the mine being built, are just one of the groups that are going to be negatively impacted by the development and export of Montana's Coal. Because of the wide range of negative effects, we the people of Montana should not allow the development of areas such as the the Otter Creek Coal Mine to continue.

For those of you who do not know, Montana currently is the state with the largest coal reserves in the USA. Recent plans have come to the table to develop this resource, mostly around the Otter Creek basin near the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in MT. The plan is to mine this coal, a process that will disrupt, and possibly ruin, thousands of acres of farmland, and to move it by train through Montana to Washington and Oregon to ship it to China. It will be on the magnitude of hundreds of millions of tons per year. To date, there have been many groups that have come to the table, either to support or oppose this development. Supporters state that the economic benefits will outweigh any possible negative effects. While this is arguably true in the

present it is another story in the long run. On the other hand opponents of coal say quite the opposite. Coal is the dirtiest fossil fuel and its development will have disastrous effects on the environment. It's burning will result in the release of Carbon Dioxide and other harmful greenhouse gasses. The excavation will result in the destruction of pristine valleys and productive agricultural land, the state's number one industry, and possibly destroy the surrounding area's aquifer. The transportation of coal will also result in traffic stops, habitat fragmentation, and the introduction of coal dust into our biosphere. In the end, the cons do outweigh the pros, and coal development should not be pursued.

The decision about whether or not the Otter Creek Coal Mine should be created is becoming an increasingly political fight. While in Helena for a recent Student Lobby day I discussed this proposal with several Montana Legislators. Representative Taylor Brown was very excited about the economic benefits associated with the development of the Otter Creek mine. Senator Greg Jersgeson, on the other hand, was more skeptical of the benefits of the Otter Creek development, and said that we should wait to develop this resource due to environmental concerns. In a recent legislative session University Presidents Engstrom and Cruzado wore coal lapels in support of the industry a political statement showing just how charged the debate is. Civilian action on from both sides has sprung up all around the Northwest; from protests by people concerned about the environmental impacts or jobs issue in Seattle (Strong) to a people's hearing regarding the export in the University of Montana's UC Theatre. In regard to such an essential decision in Montana politics, it is important that our fellow citizens stay informed and voice their opinions on the issue.

In his guest opinion article in the Billings Gazette, Charles Cashell, an engineer from Helena, discussed how the development of coal will benefit Montana. He said that if Montana is developed then it will result in lower energy prices, more jobs, and stimulated growth (Cashell). Cashell is slightly misinformed in this respect. Coal development in Montana will have little to no

effect on the region's energy prices, seeing as it is all being set to be exported to Asia. In today's entirely globalized economy, developments that are not on an incredible scale have little impact on energy prices, as they make up a small portion of global energy production.

Later in his article Cashell states that, "eliminating coal as a fuel source for America means that Montana will lose out on the incredible potential that coal holds for our state's future" (Cashell). While this may be true, there are converse environmental benefits. Any coal left in the ground is CO₂ kept out of our atmosphere. In addition, when the inevitable transformation of our energy infrastructure from fossil fuels is complete, Montana will still be a powerful player in the energy game. According to the American Wind Energy Association Montana is the state with the 3rd best wind energy potential (Potential).

Looking at a recent study from the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of Montana, Cashell adds that, "the proposed Otter Creek mine would add thousands of new, high-wage jobs in Montana and add nearly \$100 million per year to our state tax base" (Cashell). After this report was published, UM economists Thomas Michael Power and Donovan S. Power published a report describing how the original UM report was very one sided and only looked at the positive benefits of the Otter Creek Coal development (Power). According to a Berkley report, for a similar investment, renewables create more jobs than fossil fuels (Renewables).

In addition to all of these effects, the transportation of coal poses a problem. Besides simply causing more CO₂ emissions in transit, the transportation of coal results in the disruption of civilian life at traffic stops, more habitat fragmentation for already stressed local fauna, and the creation and distribution of coal dust that has negative effects on environmental and human health. According to the EPA, if it rains on a coal train the water can wash coal dust containing dangerous heavy metals such as arsenic and lead into the surrounding soils through weep holes in the bottom of the train cars. Coal dust also releases polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons which

are cancer causing and toxic to fish (Coal dust). According to Burlington Northern Santa Fe, coal trains can release between 650 and 100 pounds of coal dust per car. On a 125-car-long train that becomes a significant amount (Place). An increased number of coal trains, now a projected eighteen per day at one and a half miles long, will cause large traffic delays in every town along the rails. Besides simply inconveniencing people, it can cause dangers in smaller communities where emergency vehicles may be disrupted from crossing the tracks due to trains. Large amounts of train traffic also creates large amounts of noise pollution continually disrupting the lives of civilians, and interrupting their sleep cycles while lowering their quality of life. The construction of more railways and the increase in frequency of rail traffic is an additional negative effect of coal development, and will hurt Montanans, our communities, and our beloved wildlife.

Above all the reason that we should not develop Montana's coal resource is its contribution to climate change. Development plans call for approximately 150 million tons per year of new coal (Coal in the Northwest). The burning of this coal will result in the release of 429 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In addition to CO₂, other harmful greenhouses will be released. Today, anthropogenic climate change has become an established scientific fact. The Otter Creek Coal Mine will only contribute to global warming and exaggerate the negative effects that young people today and future generations will have to face throughout their lives. According to the international organization DARA climate change is already costing the global economy one point two trillion dollars per year (Report), an astronomical figure. According to a separate study from the University of Oregon the economic costs of climate change on Washington state will be nearly four billion dollars per year by 2020, and thirteen billion by 2080 (Climate Change). Because of this we must do everything that we can do now to slow climate change before it is too late., and stopping the Otter Creek Coal Mine must be a priority.

The political battle regarding the development of the Otter Creek Mine is brewing. While

Charles makes a solid argument, the reasons to halt the development and export of coal far outweigh the support to continue on with the plan. Developing our coal will hurt farmers and ranchers, cause disruptions in resident's lives through traffic stops and noise pollution, and impact the health of citizens and wildlife all around Montana through creation of coal dust containing harmful heavy metals and cancer causing polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, while also destroying natural lands all around the mining sites. Beyond these reasons, the coal that we export will only be turned into greenhouse gases that will contribute to the global warming epidemic. In the end the only reasonable option we have is to stop the development of the Otter Creek Coal Mine.

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