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Commenter: Lori Byron

Organization:

State: Montana

Agency: Surface Transportation Board

Initiative: Tongue River Railroad

Submission Text

Attached are the oral comments of 6 citizens given and transcribed at a "people's hearing" in Billings, Montana. These "people's hearings" were organized in downrail communities whose impacts were ignored in the draft EIS. Please consider all of these comments and address the concerns of the citizens of Billings in the final EIS.

Lori Byron

Rt. 1, Box 1079, Hardin, Montana 59034

Coal dust, especially the fine coal dust, has been identified by health professionals and doctors around the world as causing a range of problems. When these tiny, invisible particles get in our lungs, they are there to stay, and they lead to health problems like heart attacks and asthma and lung cancer. Trains lose a lot of coal dust. Over 500 pounds of coal dust will come out of one single train car between here and the West Coast. So if you do that math, and they don't spray the coal, there's 20,000 to 70,000 tons of coal dust per year that will land just in Montana. If they do spray it, that knocks it down by 90%, but that still means that there's 1,000 to 3,500 tons of coal dust landing in Montana. That's a lot of particulate matter to blow around and land in our lungs. There is no safe level for these heavy metals in our bodies, by the way.

The coal dust suppression is an issue too, because in that section of the EIS, it doesn't address health aspects at all. It mentions a term that some of you, if you're scientists, will understand, it's called an LD50. And LD50 is the amount of a substance, per body weight, that will kill 50% of the lab animals that are exposed. This doesn't address the health effect at all.

So then we have to look at the issue of burning this much coal. It doesn't matter where in the world this coal is sold to, whether it's the Midwest or China, it's going to be burned, and when it's burned, it produces carbon dioxide. That carbon dioxide goes into the atmosphere that's shared by all of us. I did the math on it, and if all the coal they anticipate, either the low range or the high range, is burned per year, it will emit three to ten times the amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than every activity that currently occurs in the state of Montana emits per year. That's a lot. When we burn these fossil fuels, currently, we get three and a half million premature deaths per year. In the US, it's 200,000 premature deaths, mostly from heart attacks and lung disease from burning fossil fuels. If we produce more coal, we'll be contributing to increased numbers of death.

Also as a reminder, for every dollar of profit that's made by a coal mine, it costs us as taxpayers \$5 in taxpayer cost, mostly medical, some transportation, to pay to help mitigate their effects. The emergency response has already been addressed, but I'd like to address that too. It takes about five minutes for a train to pass by when you're in town, at the speed that they're required to go. That means that if you're having a heart attack or you've badly cut something and you're on the wrong side of the railroad track, you could easily lose your life over this issue. Because, as you all know better than I do, there's not many over and underpasses for trains in Billings and in the other cities in Montana, this does affect each of you. The railroad certainly hasn't offered to build these overpasses.

There's another issue that hasn't been mentioned. In Chapter 7 it talks about noise pollution. It makes no mention of health effects, but it's generally agreed by health professionals that community noise adversely affects sleep disturbances, children's school

performance, heart attacks, high blood pressure, and mental health. So again, we will be doubling the amount of noise from trains if this rail line occurs.

There's also another part of the EIS that concerned me, it was in 18.10, and it talks about an increase in the rail traffic above the potential 26 trains. It mentions that if the railroad is built, there could be up to 7600 wells built for petroleum products in the regions on BLM land that's near this railroad, plus additional wells on private, state, and tribal lands. This could also result in an even higher increase in rail traffic to service and transport from these wells, and that could add to the amount of traffic already mentioned. We also have the risk then of accidents that could be amplified if the railroad was actually carrying liquid fuels like was addressed previously.

So for all these reasons, I find that the no action plan would be best.

Becky Mitchell

3124 Emilia Circle, Billings, Montana 59101

My name is Becky Mitchell and I live at 3124 Emilia Circle in Billings, Montana, and I live three houses from the railroad tracks. I live on the West end, in a subdivision of more than 100 people, and we are within the Billings City limits, and the Tongue River Railroad will impact the quality of life for myself and the families in my subdivision, which consist of a lot of young children. There are currently 10 trains per day going through this subdivision. When I first moved there about four years ago, there was one train per day, and now with a projected, and I'll with the low, eight trains in a 24-hour period, that would be at least 18 trains if not more going through this subdivision.

There are serious safety concerns. With the increase in coal train traffic, the number of derailments increases. The train runs by my house on an elevated burn, which is on a curve also, and with the increase in torrential rainstorms, this is just a disaster waiting to happen out here, for the dirt to give way and for the train to come down on top of people's houses. The diesel exhausts of passing trains currently, I work so I'm gone most of the day, but I would say at least two or three times a month that I personally see a coal train parked waiting on the track above my house. I'm assuming it's waiting for the track to be cleared so that it can go ahead and pass. The diesel is emitted into the air, and this is putting the children at risk in the subdivision and the elderly and people with emphysema and asthma.

Noise pollution. I'm unable to carry on a conversation when a coal train passes by. I'm a window opener, I like to have my windows open and I don't really like air conditioning. It's important for me to have windows open, and I can't. I just have to stop talking with people, we wait for the coal train to go by. If we're outside, we have to stop and the coal train goes by. With the increase projected in trains, I may not have any conversations. But it is important to be able to converse, and the high noise levels are related to stress-related illnesses, high blood pressure, sleep disturbances, and noise-induced hearing losses. The other really major thing is devaluation of property values. As the coal trains increase, people's property values will decrease, and that is a real impact on a great amount of people.

I'd like to address, I live on the west end, but I do think it's important to address the issues downtown at the crossings. The north side holds all the emergency services. For them to get to the south side, they have to go at an at-grade crossing, and then you have the backed up traffic and people's lives are put at risk with this situation. The STB does have the power to require the Tongue River Railroad to finance mitigation on these impacts and they do need to take action on that.

All being said, I would say this railroad should not be built, and I would highly recommend no action, no permit.

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Good evening. My name is Alaina Buffalo Spirit; my Cheyenne name is Ta'nohetse'e. It's kind of funny that everyone has to talk about this, when back in the 1800s this was ancestral Cheyenne and Lakota country, and we are claiming it today, saying we do not want railroads, we do not want the Otter Creek Coal Mine. I am a cancer survivor, that's why I speak up. I also speak up for my grandchildren, future great grandchildren, and seven generations ahead of me. I'm speaking because my homeland, the Medicine Bull homeland is two miles north of the Birney Village.

We still practice our ceremonies. We sit in a tepee, we sit and pray and sing and it's very quiet. I do not want the noise pollution when we are praying, just like in any American church. Do you guys want noises when you're praying? I don't think so. That's the same feeling I have when I'm sitting in the tepee or in the sweat lodge. I don't want any coal trains coming along and whistling their awful loud noises, because I am in meditation. I don't want any disturbance and I want my grandchildren to enjoy what I enjoy today, is quality water, the Tongue River is still somewhat clean, we've swam there since I was a child. We used to fish for catfish, eat it. I'm not so sure it's safe anymore because of the coal bed deposits from the Sheridan Decker area. We are still here. I'm natsu'uta. I'm native. We are here, and we're not going away, and we are protected by treaties. Treaties, in my view, are contracts with the US government, and Article 6 of the US Constitution says that treaties are the law of the land, and I will continue to talk about that.

I live right now on the west end, 5110 Danford Drive. However, next week, I'm moving to my homelands in Cheyenne country, and I will continue to fight from there.

Thank you.

Ronna Cunningham

4841 Custer Avenue, Billings, Montana 59101

I'm Ronna Cunningham, I'm from Texas, that's my homeland, but I've been in Montana-4841 Custer Avenue. I've been in Montana for almost 19 years. I decided tonight, I've been here long enough to claim it as my home. I came to Montana for a job. We moved to Bozeman with a little medical device company. I met my husband shortly thereafter. Got married, had babies, got trained as a teacher.

I'm a certified licensed teacher in the State of Texas. So I brought show and tell. I'd like to introduce you to Steg. Steg is a dinosaur who does not have a voice. She's got a little box in there, I got her on clearance. She's quiet, I need her. I brought my clock because I don't have a very good sense of time so I'm just going to chatter and chatter and chatter until you all stop me. I brought my postcard, because I have a very lousy memory for certain things. I brought a library because I read everything. I could have five PhDs, but I haven't written my dissertation. I have Mother Earth News, and I have to trap stuff so you can build your own clothing. Me and my husband, opposites attract. I got all the goodies on being self-sufficient, okay? We have a lot in common here, Montana and Texas people. We're tough. I have backyard chickens because I grow my own eggs, they're filled with nutrients. I got books. I got The Man Who Never Died. He wrote a song: Pie in the Sky when you Die By and By. Because the Salvation Army tried to shut him up. You know what, he went to jail, but he never died.

I'm here to explain to you that I am a canary in the coal mine. I am chemically sensitive, I have bipolar illness, I have flipped out on my family, I am a victim of domestic violence, and I have stitches in my head from two nights ago. Your nutrition, your clean water, and your clean air is critical to your health in every single way. I acted like an autistic child because I'm kind of like one. I had to go to the bank, I had to write on my arm. But I am a canary in the coal mine, I'm a sensitive individual. If I'm sitting in traffic smelling diesel fumes, it makes me ill. This is a real thing. The autism, the ADHD, the allergies, the asthma, these are our kids we're talking about. We have to fight for them. We have to fight for each other. We have to fight for our holy places, like this lady just told us about. We're all holy. We're the angels watching over each other, angels watching over me. So this Tongue River Railroad, I came in here and I said maybe, maybe, I don't know. I don't know enough. But after listening to you folks, I'm convinced. No is the right answer. No, no, no. Hell no.

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After spending some time with it, I realized that I felt like I was underwater in diving gear, making my way slowly but surely, shining a flashlight, and videotaping the various chapters and appendices. I'm going to share with you the scene that I got, and what it means to me, in the search for the best assessment of the environmental impacts of the proposed Tongue River Railroad. I'm a member of the YVCC Coal Export Committee. I'm going to skip a little bit. I live in Billings. I consider myself a member of the greater Tongue River Valley community. I could discuss my credentials with that, but not on the clock here. I'm also a long-time member of the Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Union of Concerned Scientists. I'm a public health advocate. I consulted the publications from each of these to inform these comments, and with help from Karen and Steve, put together some information that I lifted from their publications in order to make it shorter. I edited so if you're interested there.

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Let's go to the transport phase. This is the only reason, remember, for this railroad, is to take coal from the Otter Creek Mine, proposed. And environmental impacts of train transport's been mentioned, diesel exhausts and particulate matter. Communities along the railroad lines may be exposed to toxic coal inhalation. These are well-known adverse effects, and I've got the references over there. The draft EIS says that the effects of diesel exhaust reported with their modeling are all going to be within regulatory standards. Diesel, they say, is not an issue, diesel exhaust, and particulate matter from coal dust would not exceed regulatory standards, it would only be a nuisance dust. That's the larger particles. So when you hang your clothes out, this is even in there, you hang your clothes out on the line, they will get dirty, and you're going to have soot on your roof. They did mention these "nuisance" effects.

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calculate the effects of 1.4 million tons of coal a year. Not 20 million tons, which is what they're going to be permitted to carry a year, only 1.4 million because the rest of the coal is going to be displaced. I have a really good joke about this and your teenager's allowance, but I'll do that after the time is off. So they didn't have to calculate what is coming the mine and being transported, only 1.4 million tons a year, and that's what they did with greenhouse gases also. It's just amazing that the Union of Concerned Scientists just happened to do an analysis, a case study, on the side effects of a coal plant. Their sample coal plant uses 1.43 million tons of coal a year. Is that lucky or what that I just came upon that? This is over there on the red table, you can see how many tons nitrous oxide, sulfur dioxide, sludge, all of that.

So I am recommending the no build. Thank you.

Ed Gulick

3015 10th Avenue North, Billings, Montana 59101

Good evening, my name is Ed Gulick. I live at 3015 10th Avenue North here in Billings.

Regarding this draft EIS from the Surface Transportation Board for the Tongue River Railroad, I think they should be extremely embarrassed and ashamed that they would actually put out this tripe. I mean this is clearly very poorly drafted and it's one of two things: either they don't have a commitment to the truth, or they are inept. There's not a scholarly process that's followed, so it's one of those two things.

There's been economic analysis to demonstrate that there is no domestic market for this coal that has a very high sodium content. It's already been filled somewhere else, nowhere is that mentioned in this draft EIS. So already out of the gate, it's kind of absurd. But there has been, even by Arch Coal's admittance, there is a market in Asia. It's clear this is supposed to be sent there, so it misses again. So it's going through Billings then if it's going to the West Coast ports, and no mention of the impacts in Billings. I will mention just a couple of them, many of those have already been mentioned, but I live on the north side of the railroad tracks, I work on the south side, so I will be crossing the railroad tracks multiple times per day. There are costs in terms of my lost productivity waiting for trains. There are also the health and safety aspects; my office is within 150 feet of the railroad tracks. Again, those impacts are not addressed in here but there are again, numerous air quality public health issues as well as safety that at least need to be mentioned, and they are not mentioned in this draft EIS.

As an architect, I work on a lot of projects in the redevelopment of downtown Billings. That totals, in terms of past, present, and future projects, in the tens of millions of dollars and maybe even getting into the hundreds of millions of dollars. All those projects are jeopardized if you have the gates down at the train crossings for an additional three hours, maybe up to ten hours per day. All those are impacts that Billings will see, they're not addressed in this draft EIS, and they need to be going back to the drawing board. But if they insist on using the different options they've laid out, no action would be the best one to take.

Thank you.

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3015 10th Avenue North, Billings, Montana 59101

Good evening, my name is Ed Gulick. I live at 3015 10th Avenue North here in Billings.

Regarding this draft EIS from the Surface Transportation Board for the Tongue River Railroad, I think they should be extremely embarrassed and ashamed that they would actually put out this tripe. I mean this is clearly very poorly drafted and it's one of two things: either they don't have a commitment to the truth, or they are inept. There's not a scholarly process that's followed, so it's one of those two things.

There's been economic analysis to demonstrate that there is no domestic market for this coal that has a very high sodium content. It's already been filled somewhere else, nowhere is that mentioned in this draft EIS. So already out of the gate, it's kind of absurd. But there has been, even by Arch Coal's admittance, there is a market in Asia. It's clear this is supposed to be sent there, so it misses again. So it's going through Billings then if it's going to the West Coast ports, and no mention of the impacts in Billings. I will mention just a couple of them, many of those have already been mentioned, but I live on the north side of the railroad tracks, I work on the south side, so I will be crossing the railroad tracks multiple times per day. There are costs in terms of my lost productivity waiting for trains. There are also the health and safety aspects; my office is within 150 feet of the railroad tracks. Again, those impacts are not addressed in here but there are again, numerous air quality public health issues as well as safety that at least need to be mentioned, and they are not mentioned in this draft EIS.

As an architect, I work on a lot of projects in the redevelopment of downtown Billings. That totals, in terms of past, present, and future projects, in the tens of millions of dollars and maybe even getting into the hundreds of millions of dollars. All those projects are jeopardized if you have the gates down at the train crossings for an additional three hours, maybe up to ten hours per day. All those are impacts that Billings will see, they're not addressed in this draft EIS, and they need to be going back to the drawing board. But if they insist on using the different options they've laid out, no action would be the best one to take.

Thank you.