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### Gregoire needs to weigh in on proposed coal-terminal

Gov. Chris Gregoire needs to step up and take action against the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal project north of Bellingham, writes guest columnist Stephan Michaels.

By Stephan Michaels

Special to The Times



IT was a privilege to speak with Gov. Chris Gregoire recently on the KCTS-TV program, "Ask the Governor." I asked about her thoughts on the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal (GPT) north of Bellingham. For anyone unfamiliar, Seattle-based SSA Marine wants to build the largest export terminal on the continent, so it can ship up to 48 million tons of coal to China each year.

"... [W]e're going to put it through the environmental-review process," Gregoire replied. "And I am not going to get involved in it ... . I have never taken a position for or against it."

True, the governor hasn't taken an official stance, but it appears her office initially viewed the project favorably. In July 2010, gubernatorial chief of staff Jay Manning emailed as much to environmental attorney John Arum.

"The SSA proposal fits very well with our export initiative ... ," Manning offered. In fairness, that was before SSA disclosed its contract to ship massive amounts of coal from Wyoming.

Since then, communities all along the northwest rail corridor have cried foul, expressing grave concerns over human-health impacts from wafting coal dust, diesel exhaust and sundry effects from railway congestion.

Yet, SSA argues that rail traffic needn't be included in the environmental-impact study. The company alleges that trainloads of coal would still travel through Washington, even if the terminal weren't built, only to be shipped from ports in British Columbia. "The trains are

coming anyway!" goes the mantra.

Not likely. Ports in B.C. are operating near capacity. While there are plans for expansion, Canada's own metallurgic and thermal coal producers would undoubtedly garner the vast majority of export contracts, as is currently the case.

It's unrealistic to expect Canadian ports would open all their capacity to American producers. Some U.S. coal might still rumble through Northwest Washington, but nothing close to the volume that Gateway Pacific would handle.

Ergo, all train impacts — from coal dust and diesel exhaust to noise pollution and disruptions to transportation — must be reviewed.

Also vital are the potential impacts on the marine environment. Shipping that amount of coal would entail 450 massive, single-hulled cargo vessels dieseling in and out of the narrow lanes of Rosario and Haro Straits.

Spewing thousands of tons of diesel exhaust, those freighters would vie for passage with heavy oil-tanker traffic to and from Washington and B.C., heightening the probability of a collision. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, oil spills pose the greatest threat to our endangered southern resident orcas.

Equally critical are the economics. GPT would create good construction jobs and some long-term employment. But at what cost? An analysis prepared by Public Financial Management (PFM) concluded, "If all the projected employment benefits of GPT were achieved, it could still have a net negative employment impact ... ."

That is, GPT could harm local economies, costing more jobs than it creates. Bellingham's waterfront would specifically be at risk, "largely due to train traffic," according to the PFM executive summary. Small wonder the proponents don't want rail impacts studied!

Yet, the chief steward of the Evergreen State won't step in. Understandably, Gregoire has only nine months left in office, but the ecological well-being of Northwest Washington is clearly at risk. Why put this Pandora's box through a process ultimately geared to grant its approval?

Is history repeating? Cherry Point, the site for the coal port, is the exact location where Chicago Bridge and Iron sought to construct oil platforms in 1982. The Legislature approved that project, but then-Gov. John Spellman vetoed the bill, citing unacceptable risks to the marine environment. A gutsy move during a major recession; it was the right thing to do.

The question now is, what will be Gov. Gregoire's legacy?

*Stephan Michaels is a Northwest Washington freelance journalist who writes about animal behavior and ecology.*