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Spokane seeks seat at talks on proposed Vancouver oil terminal

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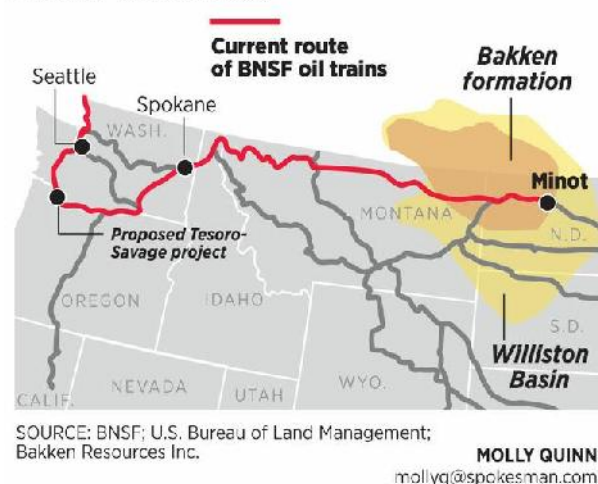
Tags: Bakken oil Ben Stuckart BSNF David Condon Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council Oil trains rail safety Spokane City Hall Spokane Riverkeeper Tesoro Corp.

A BNSF freight train pulling 103 cars of crude oil from North Dakota's Bakken formation derailed in rural Illinois last week, sending flames and jet-black smoke into the sky and triggering warnings from federal officials of a "substantial danger" of contaminating the Mississippi River.

Last month, a similar incident occurred in rural West Virginia when an oil train carrying 70,000 barrels of Bakken oil derailed and exploded, engulfing 19 tanker cars in flames, destroying a home and sending giant fireballs 300 feet into the air. In 2013, a train carrying Bakken crude crashed in a Quebec town, killing 47 people.

Any one of these incidents could lead to the evacuation of 20,000 people if they happened in downtown Spokane; there's no telling the extent of the lives lost or property damaged in the city's core in such a scenario.

BNSF rail lines



Derailments, leaks and explosions of trains carrying crude oil are becoming more common, thanks in large part to the increased production of Bakken oil in the nation's northern hinterland. A proposal to open a terminal in Vancouver, Washington, to handle the oil has prompted Spokane's elected officials to ask for a "seat at the table" in discussions about the proposal, citing Spokane's location on the rail lines that could carry up to 360,000 barrels of crude oil, about 15 million gallons, from the Bakken

oil fields every day.

"Those trains will go through the city of Spokane. The petition seeks a seat at the table for Spokane to ensure that the community's unique public health, safety and

environmental interests are represented,” Mayor David Condon said. “The City Council and I are united in seeking that seat and advocating for the interest of our community.”

Condon noted that Spokane is the only urbanized area the oil trains will enter before they get to Vancouver.

By filing what’s called a petition for intervention, the city joins seven other parties representing an array of interests, including a coalition of environmentalists, a labor union, the developer of a planned 32-acre project near the proposed terminal, tribal groups and the city of Washougal, Washington. The state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council is examining the terminal proposed by Tesoro Corp., a petroleum refiner, and Savage Companies, a transportation company. The council will consider the project’s environmental impacts and public comments on the facility when it holds a formal hearing this year. If the city’s petition is accepted, it will be part of that hearing.

Oil train traffic through Washington state

Crude oil from North Dakota’s Bakken oil fields moves across the state to refineries and ports in Western Washington. Some heads south to Oregon or California.



The city of Vancouver, which opposes the project, is automatically included in the discussions. So are the Port of Vancouver, Clark County and the state Department of Natural Resources. More than 30,000 people have commented on the project so far. A recommendation on the project will be made to Gov. Jay Inslee by Nov. 1, and he will have 60 days to approve or reject the proposal.

BNSF Railway, which will ship the crude oil from North Dakota to the Vancouver facility, said it supports the proposed project and that the company can handle the hazardous load because it’s a “proven, safe, established ... railroad operation that has been in place for years.”

The city’s petition to join the discussion over the facility was filed at the Feb. 27 deadline, as were the other seven petitions, but it followed more than a year of discussion at the city, done primarily at the behest of City Council President Ben Stuckart.

Last month, Stuckart sent a letter to Condon asking for the city to petition to join the discussion. In his letter, Stuckart, who has long expressed his opposition to oil trains passing through town, said he was moved once again to join the Tesoro-Savage facility

discussion after the West Virginia derailment and explosion.

“A similar incident in Spokane would devastate our downtown commercial core, risk contamination to the Spokane River, and could result in significant death and injury,” he wrote, echoing concerns he expressed last year, when he called the trains “almost moving bombs.”

‘Direct threat to the river’

Condon didn’t go as far as Stuckart, but he also linked his concerns to the rail’s position over the region’s sole source of water, the Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer, and its proximity to the Spokane River and Latah Creek. According to the facility’s proposal, up to 120 train cars carrying crude oil could go through town each day. Each can carry about 30,000 gallons of oil.

Jerry White, who leads Spokane Riverkeeper, said the proposed facility and subsequent oil shipments pose “a direct threat to the river.”

His organization is one of eight environmental groups jointly opposing the project under the moniker Earthjustice. The other groups are the Sierra Club, the Columbia Riverkeeper, Climate Solutions, ForestEthics, Friends of the Columbia River Gorge, the Fruit Valley Neighborhood Association and the Washington Environmental Council.

“We’re concerned for the same reason as the city of Spokane,” White said. “These oil trains are going right through the heart of our downtown community. And some of that rail traffic would go very near open, exposed pieces of the aquifer.”

White said if oil spilled into the waterways along the rail route, it would threaten endangered salmon species in the Columbia River, and trout species in the Inland Northwest.

“We know that oil is really hard on the food web. We have redband trout on sections of the river that the rail travels over or nearby,” he said. “The rail crosses the Spokane River on Trent, it crosses Hangman Creek and it crosses one of the few trout-bearing tributaries of the Hangman: Marshall Creek.”

White said he is concerned local emergency crews couldn’t handle a derailment and its fallout, pointing to the response by crews in West Virginia. He said he “personally would rather see that Bakken oil stay in the ground.”

“When I was watching that disaster, something struck me. The fire chief in that little town

said they were just backing off and letting that oil burn,” he said. “I projected that onto Spokane. Can you imagine this happening in the downtown corridor and the fire crews saying the only thing we can do is back off and let them burn?”

Spokane Fire Department Assistant Chief Brian Schaeffer said the region’s emergency responders are “prepared to the extent we can be” if an oil train derailed.

“We would prefer not to have the threat to the community at all,” Schaeffer said, noting that between 1,000 and 20,000 people would have to be evacuated if such an incident occurred in Spokane.

“In this case, it is much easier to prevent these situations than respond to them,” he said. “It would be better not to transport hazardous materials through the community. In the case of Bakken crude, that is a product that we would prefer not to have spill or crash in Spokane County.”

Usually incident-free

Gus Melonas, a BNSF spokesman, said the railway was more than prepared to handle increased loads of crude oil from North Dakota.

“Our northern route is perfectly positioned geographically as we run through the Bakken region and to the Pacific Northwest destination points,” he said.

As a “common carrier,” Melonas said, BNSF can’t “control what we haul. We control how we haul it.” Melonas said the company has replaced all the rails within Spokane city limits in the last three years, and has set strict speed controls limiting oil trains to 45 mph “even in the middle of nowhere.”

He said that “99.999 percent of all hazmat handled makes it to its destination incident-free and without a release” and that there hasn’t been a death as a result of a release since 1981. Despite such a safety record, Melonas said, “BNSF is in support of an enhanced car” that is better suited to carry Bakken crude, which is more flammable than other crude.

“BNSF has concerns. That’s the reason we’re investing,” Melonas said. “That’s the reason for continued focus ... on upgraded track improvements.”

In Thursday’s oil train derailment in Illinois and last month’s in West Virginia, the trains’ tank cars were a newer model known as the 1232. It was designed during safety upgrades voluntarily adopted by the industry four years ago in hopes of keeping cars

from rupturing during derailments.

According to the Association of American Railroads, about 9,500 train cars carried crude oil nationwide in 2009. By 2013, that number had jumped to well over 400,000 carloads, or about 290 million barrels of crude oil. Oil pipelines, by comparison, carried 8.3 billion barrels of crude oil. No pipelines carry crude oil through Washington.

In 2014, according to the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, there were 141 “unintentional releases” of crude oil by rail companies, the highest on record. Rails averaged 25 spills a year between 1975, when the government began collecting such data, and 2012. The volume of oil spilled by trains in 2013 was higher than all the oil spilled in the previous 37 years combined.

Though Condon would not take a stance on whether he approved of oil trains going through town, he said he viewed the discussion as “part of a much larger plan for the city to deal with any of the possible threats to our environment or the safety of our citizens.”

Brian Coddington, the mayor’s spokesman, said he couldn’t share too many specifics, but noted that the city has met with the city’s congressional delegation and the federal Government Accountability Office to discuss freight traffic in Spokane. City officials also have spoken with the state Department of Ecology’s spill response team and the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission to discuss crude oil transportation and expansion of facilities. The mayor serves as co-chair of the Association of Washington Cities ad-hoc rail committee, which met again last month, Coddington said.

White, with the Spokane Riverkeeper, suggested he was prepared to do all he could to stop the oil trains.

“It’s a sobering reality we’re all facing right now,” he said. “It’s only been in the last couple of years that this has developed.”

White said he was pleased the city joined the discussion.

“I’m really happy to see that they don’t have their head in the sand and are getting involved in the process,” he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.