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Surface Transportation Board Decision Document:

<http://www.stb.dot.gov/decisions/readingroom.nsf/fc695db5bc7ebe2c852572b80040c45f/b72de182f5e0673a85257b33006cc07a?OpenDocument>

Ranchers, conservationists praise federal agency decision to study coal-to-China railroad

Last Friday, the Surface Transportation Board (STB) released its decision to study the impacts of the proposed Tongue River Railroad from the mine to the ports on the West Coast. This decision met praise from members of Northern Plains Resource Council who have worked for three decades to prevent the railroad from industrializing a ranching valley.

“We are happy the STB realized that the effects of this railroad and the mine it serves will be felt in communities all along the rail line. No other agency is stepping forward to study the cost of installing overpasses, underpasses and other infrastructure changes to allow communities to live with the dramatic increase in rail traffic that is predicted from companies looking to export their coal overseas.” said Walter Archer, Chair of Northern Plains resource Council and who ranches near the proposed Otter Creek mine in Montana, “It does acknowledge the many public comments it received from community leaders down the rail line and we appreciate that. We hope they stick to their guns and study the effects on the entire Northwest from proposed mines to proposed West Coast coal ports.”

Northern Plains is Montana conservation and family agriculture organization that has been fighting the Tongue River Railroad for 30 years because of the destruction it would cause to farmers and ranchers along the route in southeastern Montana. The STB acknowledges the many comments it received from elected officials and rail corridor residents from Montana through Washington.

Arch Coal and Tongue River Railroad Company (TRRC) have refused so far to disclose in their applications where they plan to ship the coal. “In preparing the EIS, the Office of Environmental Analysis will use modeling and other available information to project economically reasonable and feasible transportation movements,” it said in its report.

“Now that the Tongue River Railroad has said it wants to include the Colstrip route which essentially heads due west, there should be little doubt where they intend to ship it. It wouldn’t make sense to head west and double back east if they were going to sell it in the U.S.,” continued Archer.

STB also acknowledged the challenge it will have in how to define the project area. The vast majority of scoping comments addressing the destination of the coal presumed that coal carried on TRRC’s proposed line would go to Asian power plants. According to TRRC, some coal may be used for electricity generation within Montana, it may move some coal to the Midwest, and it may export some coal to Asia and to Europe via ports widely spread throughout the country. Although coal demand in the U.S. is declining, the coal market, TRRC asserts, is so volatile that more accurate predictions are impossible.

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