



OregonLive.com

Everything Oregon

Oregon should stop dragging out air permit for coal facility: Agenda 2013

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

Follow on Twitter

on April 01, 2013 at 5:01 PM, updated April 01, 2013 at 5:34 PM

Gov. John Kitzhaber and his Washington state counterpart, Jay Inslee, teamed up last month on a letter decrying the exportation of U.S. coal, which is likely to increase in coming years thanks largely to Asian energy demands. "We cannot seriously take the position in international and national policymaking that we are a leader in controlling greenhouse gas emissions," the governors write, "without also examining how we will use and price the world's largest proven coal reserves."

While the letter, sent to the Council on Environmental Quality in Washington, D.C., focuses on the federal government's role in controlling exports, it notes that Oregon and Washington are reviewing permits for a number of shipping terminals. Lest anyone suspect that the governors' opposition to exports might affect the handling of these permits, Kitzhaber and Inslee insist that state "agencies are committed to a rigorous, fair and objective process to review these applications, within the scope of our respective authorities."

That commitment to fairness doesn't seem to be shared by Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality, at least according to the people working on Ambre Energy's Morrow Pacific project. Two days after the governors sent their letter to the CEQ, Morrow Pacific president Clark Moseley sent a letter to the DEQ. In it, he argues that his project "needs a permitting process it can depend on -- one that does not change regularly in response to the opposition of a minority."

He has a point, and if Kitzhaber is serious about the state's commitment to a fair process, he ought to tell the DEQ to step on the gas.

The permit in question covers emissions -- coal dust, in this case -- at a transloading facility Ambre would like to build on the Columbia River at the Port of Morrow. There, coal arriving on trains would be moved within an enclosed facility to barges.

The company submitted a permit application in February 2012 -- more than 13 months ago. The DEQ responded less than two weeks later by assuring Moseley that the facility didn't need a permit, a decision that cleared the way for Morrow Pacific to begin construction. In mid-July, however, the DEQ suddenly changed course.

"In our first review of the application," an agency official said in a July 12 letter, "DEQ did not account for any uncontrolled emissions from the temporary storage of coal at the facility." The letter acknowledged the

"oversight," apologized, requested a new application and promised to "make every effort to issue a permit as expeditiously as possible taking into consideration our legal obligations for public participation."

Why did it take so long for DEQ to change course? "I don't know," says DEQ spokeswoman Joanie Stevens-Schwenger.

In any case, the DEQ held a trio of public meetings late last year and, as one might expect, received thousands of comments. As a result of the sheer volume, "we're still evaluating all the public concerns on this," Stevens-Schwenger told The Oregonian's Scott Learn last week. While the department has done some work on the permit, says Stevens-Schwenger, it has no timeline for rolling it out.

Which means, of course, that construction and job creation are on hold, too. Among those who expressed frustration to The Oregonian editorial board last week are John Mohlis, executive secretary of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council; and Mark Eitzen, vice president and general manager of Gunderson Marine. Gunderson and Vigor Industrial will build covered barges to carry coal from the new terminal to the Port of St. Helens.

All of them deserve to be frustrated, Ambre in particular. The company, acting in good faith, applied for a permit well over a year ago, only to be whipsawed by the DEQ and bogged down in process. Meanwhile, the governor is petitioning the federal government to clamp down on coal exports. If Ambre officials suspected that state officials, ideologically opposed to coal use, were trying to induce a fatal episode of deal-fatigue, could you blame them?

People are opposed to Ambre's project for a number of reasons. Some, like the governor, worry about greenhouse gas emissions and other pollution. Others worry about barge traffic, though Ambre's project will simply push traffic closer to levels seen in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, the elusive air quality permit isn't intended to respond to such larger concerns, says Marcia Danab, public affairs specialist for the DEQ's Northwest region office. The issue is coal dust, and the DEQ shouldn't need 13 months to figure out whether the project exceeds state standards. Nonetheless, the clock is still running.

This would be a good time for Kitzhaber to demonstrate his commitment to a fair process.



Agenda 2013

Fix PERS

Address Oregon's tax structure

Grow jobs and income

Improve educational funding and function

Build the bridge

Protect and expand personal freedom

[Read more about the editorial board's priorities for Oregon.](#)