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JUN 21 2011
DEPT OF ECOLOGY

WHATCOMDOCS
PO Box 4444
Bellingham, WA 98227
whatcomdocs@gmail.com

June 18, 2011

Dear Ms. Dewell,

At a public meeting two weeks ago, members from a group of eighty local physicians expressed concerns about health issues related to developing a coal exporting facility at Cherry Point, in Whatcom County. Getting eighty local physicians to publicly oppose this project was a remarkable occurrence, as doctors are politically diverse, averse to controversy, and generally prefer not to broadcast their opinions. Since then, the physician membership of Whatcom Docs, an organization committed to understanding and educating our community about the health impacts of this project, has swelled to more than 150, with more caregivers signing on every day.

Until recently, our media exposure to this proposal has been a series of full-page newspaper ads. This well-funded promotional campaign has sought to extol the economic benefits of the project, by which coal will be mined in Montana and shipped by train across Washington State and up the coast to Cherry Point where it will be loaded onto ships bound for China. The corporations pushing this project wield tremendous clout and stand to profit immensely.

Closer examination of the details reveals that increased coal shipments have the potential for significant harm to the communities through which this coal will travel. Plans call for forty-eight million metric tons of coal to be transported annually, brought in by nine (eighteen if the round-trip is considered) uncovered trains daily, each over a mile in length, running through downtown Bellingham and many other communities along the route across our state.

As physicians, our concern is primarily for the health of our patients. We are aware that coal trains traveling through our communities and the massive bulk cargo ships offshore would emit significant amounts of diesel particulate pollution. There are irrefutable links between these pollutants and cardiovascular and respiratory disease, reproductive health issues, and malignancy, with no "threshold value" for impacts on human health. Much like cigarettes, a little exposure is bad and more is worse. We are also concerned about the coal dust which blows off in amounts of five-hundred pounds per car from these trains of over one-hundred cars. Proponents may downplay the dust as "most of it" will blow off before it gets to Whatcom County. With the length and frequency of these trains, that is not reassuring, as even a fraction of the estimated dust lost would be unacceptable.

We are also concerned about the potential for delays in emergency response times and about trauma at rail crossings. A Bellingham woman was killed by a train while

biking through Boulevard Park recently, leaving a grieving family and a lawsuit against the railroad and the city (which taxpayers must pay to defend). Twenty more trains traveling through multiple communities across the entire state each day will only increase the likelihood of these tragic events.

With our favorable location, Whatcom County is fortunate to have very good air quality. That's why many of us live here and want to protect it. At a time when our state legislature has acknowledged the toxicity inherent in burning coal and voted to shut down the last remaining coal-burning power plants in our state, should we be exporting coal to Asia? Recent studies have shown that a significant amount of the mercury in our local drinking water and environment comes from coal burned in Asia, returning via atmospheric currents.

As physicians, it is not for us to evaluate the economic consequences of such a project or to fully analyze the impacts on traffic, local businesses, or waterfront development. Nor is it our area of expertise to determine the impact on local herring stocks or the aquatic environment. We do know that burning coal is undeniably bad for human health and that our exposure to coal dust and diesel particulate matter will be significantly increased and our community health impaired if this project proceeds. As physicians, our area of expertise is human health. We are concerned that this project will have significant adverse effects on the health and wellbeing of our own patients and local communities in Washington State.

We ask that you request the Department of Ecology to take the lead in the SEPA and EIS process for this project as the impacts would be felt across the state and would certainly have significant effects on human health beyond the terminal site itself.

Sincerely,
Whatcom Docs

Camilla Allen, MD
Daniel Austin, MD
Diane Arvin, MD
Barbara Bachman, MD
Laura Backer, MD
Kristi Bailey, MD
Terri Blackburn, MD
Pete Beglin, MD
Claire Beiser, MD, MPH
Don Berry, MD
Richard Binder, MD
Nancy Bischoff, MD
Allan Buehler, MD
Soren Carlsen, MD
Joshua Cohen, MD
Paul Conner, MD

Kirstin Curtis, ARNP
Jan Dank, MD
Marc Davis, MD
Joe Deck, MD
Katherine Dickinson, MD
Peter Dillon, MD
Thang Do, MD
Mark Doherty, MD
Kevin Doods, MD
Jim Eggen, MD
Jerry Eisner, MD
David Elkayam, MD
Laurie Emert, MD
Anneliese Floyd, MD
Ryan Fortna, MD, PhD
Dianne Foster, ARNP

Randy Frank, DO
Eric Frankenfeld, MD
Jonathan Franklin, MD
Anthony Gargano, MD
Ken Gass, MD, PhD
Jeremy Getz, MD
Robert Gibb, MD
Stan Gilbert, MD
Martha Gillham, MD
Lorna Gober, MD
David Goldman, MD
Aaron Gonter, MD
Erin Griffith, MD
Deborah Hall, MD
William Hall, MD
David Hansen, MD

James Harle, MD
Emil Hecht, MD
Grace Hein, ARNP
Michael Hejtmanek, MD
Harry Herdman, MD
Marcy Hipskind, MD
John Holroyd, MD
Jim Holstine, DO
Sherry Holtzman, MD
Will Hong, MD
John Hoyt, MD
Bao Huynh, MD
Kellie Jacobs, MD
Meg Jacobson, MD
Gertrude James, ARNP
Frank James, MD
Helen James, MD
Lisa Johnson, ARNP
David Jessup, MD
Mitchell Kahn, MD
Cary Kaufman, MD
Daniel Kim, MD
Gail Knops, MD
Joost Knops, MD
Ann Knowles, MD
Andrew Kominsky, MD
Pamela Laughlin, MD
Sandy George Lawrence, MD
Josie Lee, MD
Tyler Leedom, DO
Kathy Leone, MN, ARNP
Rick Leone, MD, PhD
Linda Leum, MD
Hank Levine, MD
Chris Lewis, DO
Serge Lindner, MD
Bill Lombard, MD
Jonathan Lowy, MD
Leasa Lowy, MD
Thomas Ludwig, MD
Bruce Mackay, MD
Maggie Mamolen, MD
Vincent Matteucci, MD
Dick McClenahan, MD
Marianne McElroy, PA
Monica Mahal, MD
Scott McGuinness, MD
Judson Moore, PA
David Morison, MD
Gib Morrow, MD

Larry Moss, MD
Sara Mostad, MD, PhD
Ward Naviaux, MD
John Neutzmann, DO
Deborah Oksenberg, MD
David Olson, MD
Rob Olson, MD
Patricia Otto, MD
Tracy Ouellette, MD
Mark Owings, MD, PhD
Evelyn Oxenford, ARNP
Clark Parrish, MD
Mike Pietro, MD
Trevor Pitsch, MD
Denise Plaisier, PA
Ronda Pulse, MD
Gita Rabbani, MD
Andris Radvany, MD
Jon Ransom, MD
Christoph Reitz, MD
Niles Roberts, MD
William Scott Sandeno, MD
Paul Sarvasy, MD
Neal Saxe, MD
James Schoenecker, MD
Julie Seavello, MD
Barbara Schickler, ARNP, CNM
Melana Schinke, MD
Miriam Shapiro, MD
Janine Shaw, MD
John Shaw, MD
Mary Ellen Shields, MD
Hannah Sheinin, MD
Russell Sheinkopf, MD
Lora Sherman, MD
Alan Shurman, MD
Bonnie Sprague, ARNP
Berle Stratton, MD
Jenny Sun, MD
Gregory Sund, MD
Warren Taranow, DO
Michael Taylor, MD
M. Greg Thompson, MD, MPH
Teresa Thornberg, MD
Loch Trimmingham, MD
Elizabeth Vennos, MD
Steve Wagoner, MD
April Wakefield Pagels, MD
Heather Whitaker, ARNP
Sara Wells, ARNP
Anne Welsh, MD

Greg Welsh, MD
David Wisner, MD
Steven Wisner, MD
Todd Witte, MD
Chao-ying Wu, MD
Greg Wolgamot, MD, PhD
Stephen Woods, MD
Darla Woolman, PA
Jessica Yoos, MD