

How Much Coal Dust Will There Really Be?

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Earlier this month, [I reported on](#) a group of doctors who want Oregon to stop the permitting process for coal export projects to do a review of potential health impacts.

The group, [Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility](#), cited a figure for the amount of coal lost in transport – 3 percent of the load. The doctors also said coal trains can lose as much as 500 pounds of coal dust per car for every 500 miles traveled. They said that (together with diesel emissions from the trains themselves) raises health concerns for people who live along the rail lines between the mines in Montana and Wyoming and export terminals in the Northwest.

“If you live near the tracks, that’s going to be bad news for you,” said Regna Merritt of the physicians group. “For both your lungs and your heart.”

The numbers, as it turned out, came from a [Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad report](#) to coal shippers in the Powder River Basin (PRB) about a new policy designed to control coal dust emissions along the railways.

And according to Suann Lundsberg, spokeswoman with BNSF, they’re being taken out of context.

“The studies we performed on the amount of coal dust are very rough estimates,” she said. “What some folks aren’t telling you are coal dust events are primarily in the Powder River Basin and decline substantially as they travel farther away.”

Here’s an excerpt from the BNSF fact sheet on its new coal dust emissions rules:

“The amount of coal dust that escapes from PRB coal trains is surprisingly large. While the amount of coal dust that escapes from a particular coal car depends on a number of factors, including the weather, BNSF has done studies indicating that from 500 lbs to a ton of coal can escape from a single loaded coal car. Other reports have indicated that as much as 3% of the coal loaded into a coal car can be lost in transit. In many areas, a thick layer of black coal dust can be observed along the railroad right of way and in between the tracks. Given the high volume of loaded coal trains that move each day in the PRB, large amounts of coal dust accumulate rapidly along the PRB rail lines.”

How much coal dust will be created by each the six proposed coal export projects in Oregon and Washington is a big, outstanding question. Terminal developers say they have technology that will control and minimize coal dust at the terminal sites, and that there are methods of loading coal into trains that reduce coal dust emissions along the delivery route.

“If you effectively load cars correctly and you spray with a surfactant, which is a crusting agent – like a hairspray it holds the dust in – if you do these things in combination,” Lundsberg said, “we know it reduces the dusting by 85 percent.”

BNSF put the new dust control rules in place for all its shippers in October of last year, so in theory there should be less coal dust coming off trains by now. But Lundsberg didn't have current data to back that up.

Meanwhile, she said, some opponents of coal exports are taking the numbers from the BNSF study and multiplying them by the number of rail cars and the miles they're traveling from the mines to the export terminals.

“You simply can't do that,” she said, “because our studies showed these issues happened in the basin. They were threats to our track and caused millions and millions of dollars in accelerated maintenance costs.”

Lundsberg compared the coal dust emissions from trains to taking a dusty book off the shelf and blowing the dust off of it: “If you blow it a second time, no dust blows off of it.”

So, how much coal dust will there really be along the rail lines leading to the proposed Northwest coal terminals? Sounds to me like it depends on which part of the rail line you're talking about and whether the shipper is using dust reduction methods.