

DAMNED LIES AND DIRTY COAL

By Heather Kathryn Ross Photography by Chris Jordan-Bloch

A towering white crane stands ready to load and unload cargo from ships at the waterfront in Oakland, California, the site of a proposed coal export terminal.

On the Oakland waterfront, home to one of the nation's busiest ports, a garrison of 12-story white cranes loads cargo onto ships the size of city blocks. One piece of waterfront land—a former U.S. Army base—has become a political battleground, pitting locals against a developer with plans to build the largest coal export terminal on the West Coast.

Just across the freight tracks from the base, Reverend Ken Chambers leads a growing congregation at West Side Missionary Baptist Church. Twenty-five years ago, Chambers inherited the pulpit from his father, who had led West Side since 1971.

Chambers took up his father's mantle of community activism, advocating for affordable housing, access to healthy

food and reduced pollution from traffic to the port.

"It's not only about going to church on Sunday; it's about living that life during the week to give people hope and help them to work for change," Chambers says.

West Oakland was hit hard by a slump after WWII and again when the U.S. Army closed the base in 1999.

Crisscrossed by freeways and train lines, the neighborhood sees six times more kids hospitalized for asthma than other California communities. A black child born into a low-income family in West Oakland will die an average of 15 years earlier than a white child born in the nearby Oakland hills, located above the plumes of smog from trucks, trains and ships.



Reverend Ken Chambers at the pulpit of West Side Missionary Baptist Church in Oakland, California.

In 2012, developer Phil Tagami won a bid to lease part of the empty base and transform it into the Oakland Bulk and Oversized Terminal, which he said would bring high-paying warehouse jobs moving extra-large cargo like wind turbines. Tagami repeatedly assured residents, eager for jobs but wary of more pollution, that the terminal wouldn't handle hazardous shipments of coal.

"The Oakland Bulk and Oversized Terminal...is saying NO to coal," Tagami wrote on Facebook in 2014. "We share this one planet, and the only path to clean the air is to at some point stop polluting it."

Yet the very next year, Oakland community members found themselves on the receiving end of a swindle. In April 2015, the public learned that Utah policymakers, investment bankers and coal company agents had hatched a plan to buy half of the terminal's nine-million-ton capacity to ship Utah's coal to Asia. In return,

the project backers promised Tagami \$53 million in public money to help build the terminal. That cash would come from federal dollars set aside to help Utah communities negatively impacted by coal mining and oil drilling. The money had been used in the past to fund local fire stations, ambulances and parks.

According to the plan, coal would be transported from Utah to Oakland in open-top trains a mile long. Trains

would travel about 700 miles to the terminal, passing through Reno, over the Sierra Nevada Mountains and through Sacramento to West Oakland. Coal trains like these release

hundreds of tons of coal dust laden with arsenic and mercury that can pollute waterways and lead to cancer and lung diseases.

"Why the hell are we going to go backward by bringing coal through here?" Chambers says. "No way! Not [when] my parishioners live two blocks from this site."

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Powering Past Coal

As a member of the Power Past Coal campaign, Earthjustice has helped beat back coal export proposals in the Pacific Northwest since 2010. Earthjustice and other environmental groups have helped defeat five proposed coal export terminals in Washington and Oregon and are eyeing two others, including the planned facility in Oakland.

In the most recent victory, on May 9, the Army Corps of Engineers denied a permit for what would have been the largest coal export hub in North America. The permit was denied because the terminal, near Bellingham, Washington, would have harmed the Lummi Nation, a Native American group with a protected right to fish in waters near the terminal site.

"Exporting coal is a 19th-century solution to 21st-century energy problems," says Earthjustice attorney Jan Hasselman, who has worked tirelessly on coal export cases. "By stopping these coal projects, the Pacific Northwest is helping lead the nation in shifting to clean, renewable energy."

- Defeated terminal
- Proposed terminal
- Industrial
- Commercial
- Residential
- Schools
- Parks
- Existing rail line
- Proposed rail line



(Continued)

In March 2016, project boosters convinced the Utah legislature to funnel the community impact money through a different state agency to get around the community benefit requirements. Proponents argued the state needed space at the Oakland terminal because without a destination for their coal, rural Utah counties would be gutted by layoffs. Facing updated pollution laws, skeptical investors and stiff competition from natural gas and cheaper, cleaner renewables, three major U.S.

few legislators to fork over \$50 million of someone else's money, that's a good deal."

Earthjustice, which has been blocking coal export proposals all along the West Coast, is part of a coalition of unions, religious leaders, environmentalists and social justice advocates educating the public about the Oakland coal plan and exploring ways to fight back.

Much of the grassroots organizing in California—phone banking, canvassing,

Vivian Huang of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, another member of the coalition, partners with residents of Oakland's historic Chinatown district, adjacent to West Oakland. She's seen how coal trains are fouling the air in nearby Richmond and how hard residents are working to block crude oil trains in Benicia. Huang says local governments should look for solutions to environmental problems that "put frontline communities at the center of leadership and the center of solutions."

"Allowing a dirty and dangerous commodity like coal to be exported through the state is not at all consistent with California's climate goals and its ambitions to be seen as a climate leader," says Earthjustice attorney Irene Gutierrez, who is keeping a close eye on plans for the terminal.

The Oakland City Council can block coal shipments to the waterfront for health and safety reasons but is dragging its feet. The coalition wants the council to draft an ordinance



coal companies recently declared bankruptcy. Utah is betting its future—and Tagami is betting the success of the terminal—on the staying power of coal, even as coal markets at home and in China enter a tailspin.

"If coal companies could find private money to finance coal exports through Oakland, they would. But they can't. So coal export supporters have to look for taxpayers to hoodwink," says Earthjustice attorney Ted Zukoski, who's partnering with Utah groups to oppose public funding for coal shipping. "If you only have to convince a

teach-ins, visits to city councilors—is spearheaded by Brittany King of the Sierra Club, who grew up in Oakland. She notes that most community members she works with want the Army base redeveloped as a shipping terminal for rice, lumber, steel or solar panels—anything but coal.

"Some people say, 'If we don't have coal, we don't have a terminal,' but that's not true," King says. "There are a ton of other things that can be shipped. We don't want to have to compromise the health of the community for the commodity."

In addition to nonprofits, the longshoreman's union and Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf have come out against the coal proposal. On the state level, Senator Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley) has introduced bills to head off any future coal transport projects. But Governor Jerry Brown, who encouraged world leaders at the recent Paris climate talks to "live lighter on the planet," has remained silent. Brown has close ties to Tagami and even declared a one-day civic holiday for his longtime friend back in 2014.

banning coal this summer. If the council doesn't act, Earthjustice attorneys are prepared to challenge the proposal on environmental grounds.

"We may not see the ramifications of stopping coal right here today, but we're looking at the future," says Chambers. "I want my grandkids to breathe fresh air and for West Oakland not to be underwater [from sea level rise] in 50 years." 🌊