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Dirty Coal Dust Continues to be a Problem for Residents of Seward

Groups file Suit Against Railroad and Aurora Energy Services after Concerns go Ignored.

Seward, Alaska: After more than 60 days on notice, and years of complaints from local residents, the Alaska Railroad and Aurora Energy Services have failed to take meaningful steps toward fixing the coal dust and water pollution problems at their export facility in Seward. Left with no other options, Trustees for Alaska, a public interest law firm representing Alaska Community Action on Toxics and the local chapter of the Sierra Club, has filed suit over unpermitted discharges of coal into Resurrection Bay.

Without proper containment equipment at the facility, coal debris falls off the conveyor system used to load coal onto ships for export to Asia and Chile and into Resurrection Bay. Coal dust also blows off the facility's two massive coal stockpiles into the Bay, covering charter boats, other vessels and nearby neighborhoods with hazardous dust and debris.

“The coal dust is a public health concern,” said Pam Miller, executive director of Alaska Community Action on Toxics. “The dust can harm the health of community residents and visitors. Inhalation of coal dust can permanently damage lung tissue, and children, people with chronic illnesses, and the elderly are particularly vulnerable.”

“It is unfortunate that local concerns over coal pollution from the Seward facility have gone ignored for so long,” said Austin Williams, attorney at Trustees for Alaska. “This lawsuit seeks to have the Railroad and Aurora Energy control the coal pollution emanating from their facility and comply with appropriate Clean Water Act requirements.”

Coal exports from Alaska were up in 2009, with the majority of coal heading to markets in Asia and Chile. “As Alaska coal is shipped overseas, measures need to be taken to keep our air and water free from dirty coal dust,” said Emily Fehrenbacher, representative for the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club.

“Putting Seward's residents at risk from coal in our air and water is unacceptable,” Miller noted. “Especially when simple, cost-effective measures could be put in place to prevent the problem.”

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