

IDAHO'S HIGHWAY 12 AND EXXON-MOBIL'S MEGA-LOADS

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Read also "Alberta's Tar Sands and Idaho's Wilderness Gateway" at
www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/Lochsa.htm



On Monday and Tuesday of this week the people most affected by Exxon-Mobil's plans to ship huge tar sands processing equipment up Idaho's Highway 12 finally got a chance to voice their opinions. In January of 2009, without consulting the people of Idaho, Governor Butch Otter told Big Oil that he "has pledged our support and cooperation." Those who spoke at the Moscow hearing were angry that Otter presumed to speak for them.

I arrived early so that I could get my name on the speaker list, but I was told that there was to be no public presentation or Q&A. The city council chambers was set up as a poster session at which citizen could speak one on one with representatives from Exxon-Mobil and the Idaho Transportation Department.

I objected to the format saying that we expected a public presentation and an opportunity for those who attended to hear every question and every answer. Rep. Tom Trail prevailed upon the organizers to divide the time between 30 minutes at the posters and 1.5 hours for Q&A. Those who showed up in Lewiston appeared content to be "divided and conquered" by the poster format.

I asked the Exxon-Mobil representative why the equipment was not manufactured in Alberta. There are highly skilled metal workers there and they are hopping mad that the contract went to a South Korean firm instead. Exxon-Mobil is paying Sungjin Geotec \$250 million for 207 modules, but one has to add trans-Pacific shipping to the Port of Lewiston, overland transport from there to Northern Alberta, and upwards of \$40 million (\$12.2 million in Idaho) upgrading U.S. and Canadian roads. Big Oil's spokesman assured me that the Alberta metal workers' offer was higher than these total costs. To add insult to injury Exxon-Mobil, claiming that no American company could do this specialized hauling, has hired a Dutch multinational firm to do the overland transport.

The Alberta tar sands industry, using the most destructive extraction procedures in history, is robbing American and Canadian workers of much needed employment and has the gall to demand that Idahoans and Montanans bear most of the risks of transporting foreign made equipment by a foreign shipper over narrow and winding roads. The arrogance of Big Oil is astounding: they have signed the South Korean contract assuming that we will let them abuse our highways in this manner. The modules may well already be on their way to Lewiston.

Idaho transportation officials told us that they started negotiating with Exxon-Mobil two years ago and that they spoke of public hearings at that time. The lame excuse for such a long delay in public disclosure was that the plans were not completely ready. The real reason is that they knew very well that most Idahoans would be aghast at such a plan, and that they could have provided the basic ideas of the project from the very beginning. The plain truth is that only citizen outrage made the three hearings possible.

Exxon-Mobil will hire off-duty Idaho police at double overtime to escort the loads, but at an estimated 9,000 hours for 207 trips, citizens are concerned about how that might impact the highway patrol's ability to respond to emergencies elsewhere in the state. A state trooper present at the hearing told me personally, but not creditably, that these patrolmen would actually be more readily available than if they were at home with their cruisers parked in their driveways.

One citizen asked if there would be more shipments of this size--30 feet high, 24 feet wide, and 210 feet long--and whether this route would offer long-term access to Alberta's tar sands. The answer was that the 207 loads were all that was needed for the Kearle Oil Tar Sands Project. I did not get a chance to ask why Sungjin Geotec expects to sign another \$1.2 billion contract with Exxon-Mobil. At an average of \$1.2 million per module this means that an additional 1,200 shipments will travel alongside one of Idaho's most pristine wilderness river systems.

The Port of Lewiston is applying for grants to upgrade its facilities to accommodate these mega-loads. Port authorities reason that "if one oil company is successful with this alternative transportation route, many other companies will follow their lead." In a February 2009 letter of support, the Idaho congressional delegation wrote that "there exists the potential to import hundreds of component modules through the Columbia/Snake River System and Port of Lewiston."

The commissioners of Missoula County have been informed that Highways 12 and 200 will become permanent "high and wide" industrial transport routes to northern Alberta. An Alberta industrial association predicts that "this route will become the highway for energy-related products from not only South Korea, but even-lower-wage suppliers such as China and Vietnam."

The manager of Radio Free Moscow asked how these mega-loads will negotiate the narrow and curvy highway, which runs 174 miles from Lewiston to Lolo Pass. The Idaho transportation official seemed confident that it could be done safely, but local residents, who have made their own measurements, are dubious. More than half the modules are 24 feet wide but the highway is 23 feet at its widest, which means that they will extend dangerously beyond the fog lines on both sides. Similar modules now sitting in Lewiston destined for the Conoco

Phillips refinery in Billings are 30 feet wide. This summer they are scheduled to be hauled over the same route.

Local outfitter Lin Laughy reports that "in lots of places you can stand on the fog line and spit in the river. This isn't just one place or two places. This is for miles." At the Fish Creek bridge the total clearance will be 6 inches right at the edge of the Lochsa River. At the Avery bridge transportation engineers have determined that the loads, including the push truck, will be too heavy. In that case they are recommending that, because there is no grade at this point, this truck be disengaged. The largest loads will require two push trucks to make it over Lolo Pass.

Rock faces and trees will undoubtedly be hit, and there is a real possibility that a module will land in the river. As Laughy states: "The crane at the Lewiston port can't even pick these things up. That's why they have to slide them off the barges." A module in the river would dam the waters and destroy portions of the highway. It would also prevent a crane--the closest one is 10 hours away in Spokane--from getting close enough to pull it out in any reasonable amount of time.

At 300 tons a module could become a permanent fixture in the river, violating forever the natural beauty of a federally designated "wild and scenic" river. Even more likely is that the modules would slip off the dollies and land in the middle of the road. Big Oil will say that this would never happen, but that's what BP said about drilling 3 miles down in the Gulf of Mexico.

Exxon-Mobil promises that it will limit shipments to one load daily, but because it will take three days to reach the Montana border, there will be at least three loads per day on the road. Given the fact that there are actually less than 207 days in their scheduled transport period, and factoring in delays due to bad weather and mechanical failure, there might be as many as 4-6 loads on the road without enough pull-outs to allow traffic to pass. In answer to this scenario the state transportation official said emphatically that they would never approve more than one permit per day. That of course means that the whole process would most likely be take another season of hauling to complete.

Idaho's tourist industry brings in \$3.4 billion each year, and \$149 million of that amount is produced by 5,000 people in the 150 businesses along Highway 12. Most of the shipments will occur from March to November of 2011, right during the peak tourist season. These folks can bear the thought of even one slack summer. How can Big Oil and the State of Idaho assume that these businesses will survive this transportation nightmare? The only public question I allowed to ask was: "Will Exxon-Mobil re-imburse businesses for their lost revenue?" The Big Oil man said that he didn't think that there would be any such claims.

The Canadians can decide for themselves whether they want to destroy their own wilderness to feed the world's oil addiction, but we should have the right to protect our own land and rivers adjacent to Highway 12 and support the hard-working Idahoans who make their living on these great recreational resources.

Unfortunately, the citizens of Idaho have no power to decide this issue, and Exxon-Mobil is confident that it can meet the much the stricter requirements of the Montana Department of

Transportation. But each and every person who testified at the public hearings in Montana has legal standing to file suit. Big Oil will not send these gigantic and dangerous loads on their way if they have to sit at the top of Lolo Pass. Let's just hope that activists in Montana can stop this oil-addicted madness.

If a Montana suit actually stops the transport of Korean-made modules from coming through the U.S., then, as I said to the Exxon-Mobil headman, they would have been far better off having their own Alberta metal workers build them locally at higher cost. They would have also avoided the PR disaster they have already created in Idaho and Montana.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. For 38 years he has fished and rafted Idaho's rivers and hiked its wilderness trails. For this column he is indebted to the Highway 12 business people at www.FightingGoliath.com for most of the data.