

Biologist critical of CN response to Burnaby coal spill

LARRY PYNN/VANCOUVER SUN / BURNABY NOW
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A Ministry of Environment biologist said environmental impact reports done for CN Rail in the wake of a Burnaby coal derailment in January were deficient.

Inadequate water samples were taken immediately after the accident, wrote biologist Tracy Henderson in a letter to her supervisor obtained through a freedom of information request.

She feared that “the immediate data collection window may be lost, making it much more difficult to ascertain the ultimate level of impact.”

“Assessment and monitoring needs to be started immediately,” she wrote.

The reports were provided by Triton Environmental Consultants Ltd. after seven cars of a 152-car train derailed. Four cars stayed upright, but three tipped, spilling coal into Silver Creek, a fish-bearing tributary to Burnaby Lake.

The Canadian Pacific train was operated by a CN crew on CN tracks.

In her letter, Henderson, a provincial environmental impact assessment biologist, noted several problems with the reports Triton provided.

“These reports are deficient in addressing the conditions, environment, biota, and potential concerns in the impacted water bodies,” she wrote.

“It is recommended that Triton Environmental immediately undertake a more detailed assessment on the chemical characterization, environment fate and environmental impact (short and long term) of the coal spill to Silver Creek and Burnaby Lake.”

Henderson sought more information on multiple fronts, including:

- A detailed chronological report of all substantive actions taken to address the spill, including an incident summary that contains background of events leading to the spill.
- The amount of spilled coal, including the total amount contained and/or recovered, including coal dust.
- Descriptions of the baseline environment — such as climate, hydrology, wildlife, vegetation, recreation and aquatic life.
- Delineation of potential impact areas, including individual and overview site maps with information on direction of flow, land use, and critical habitat information.

- Chemical characterization, short- and long-term potential impacts to wildlife and aquatic life, human health or use of environment.

Emily Hamer, spokesperson for CN, said the ministry letter referred to a "preliminary draft correspondence" and that the final plan submitted on Feb. 21 "was accepted by the ministry."

Communications officer David Karn released a statement on behalf of the Ministry of Environment saying that "CN has now completed most of the recovery work and has committed to providing an environmental impact assessment work plan draft in the coming week."

In a report dated Feb. 14, Triton estimated 82.8 cubic metres of metallurgical coal had been deposited in Silver Creek, Burnaby Lake and Brunette River.

CN earlier said it planned to primarily use "suction dredging" to remove the coal, pumping the recovered coal-water mixture through filters to remove coal particles and sediments before discharging the water back into the creek. Crews also planned to use smaller Shop Vacs as well as shovels and buckets on more remote sections of Silver Creek.

Turtles and their eggs were also removed from the work area, while a turtle beach was restored and basking logs cleaned.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Environment Canada deferred to the province as the lead investigator in the case.