

CN report on Burnaby coal derailment "deficient", lacks details on environmental impacts

by TRAVIS LUPICK on APR 17, 2014 at 3:21 PM THE STRAIGHT

THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT may never know the full environmental consequences of a coal-train derailment that occurred in Burnaby in January 2014.

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Company reports submitted to the B.C. Ministry of Environment were deemed “deficient” and to require “more information regarding the incident”, that office concluded. What's more, the collection window for information may have been lost, it was noted. According to documents made public yesterday (April 16) in response to a freedom of information request, assessments of the derailment and potential remediation measures required improvements.

“These reports are deficient in addressing the conditions, environment, biota, and potential concerns in the impacted water bodies,” reads a Ministry of Environment memo dated February 6, 2014.

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

The incident in question occurred on January 11, 2014, when three rail cars carrying metallurgical coal through the Lower Mainland went off the tracks and spilled their contents onto the surrounding area and into a nearby body of water called Silver Creek. According to a Ministry of Environment website, approximately 270 tons of coal was spilled with a smaller volume entering the stream.

Following the accident, the Canadian National Railway Co. (commonly referred to as CN) contracted a Vancouver company, Triton Environmental Consultants Ltd., to conduct a review on its behalf and submit reports to the provincial government.

According to the documents released on April 16, Tracy Henderson, a provincial environmental-impact-assessment biologist, deemed CN's initial reports unsatisfactory. Among other points, it was requested that CN submit more detailed information pertaining to the amount of coal that was spilled, the amount of coal that was recovered following the accident, and the environmental fate of the coal that was lost.

“The initial water quality sampling conducted was very limited and doesn't address the extent of the impact,” the memo states. “The characteristics of the spilled coal, including all forms, should be addressed in terms of the fate and effects in the environment and how this would be incorporated into recovery efforts and monitoring.”

While additional research was requested, the document notes that “the immediate data collection window may be lost, making it much more difficult to ascertain the ultimate level of impact”.

It is not entirely clear how shortcomings described in the February 6 memo were addressed.

In a telephone interview, a spokesperson for CN described the reports in question as “draft documents” and part of talks with the Ministry of environment that were ongoing at the time. “From there, the discussion went back and forth,” said Jim Feeny, director of public and government affairs for CN. “A final plan was submitted on February 21, that plan was accepted, and that is the plan that is being enacted now.”

The Ministry of Environment did not make a representative available for an interview by deadline. An emailed response supplied by spokesperson David Karn states that the provincial government provided CN with recommendations to ensure clean-up work protected sensitive habitat areas.

"Ministry staff identified deficiencies in the CN recovery plan and requested a rigorous approach to measuring the recovery of the receiving environment by February 21," that email reads. "CN has now completed most of the recovery work and has committed to providing an environmental impact assessment workplan draft in the coming week."

According to the report, chum salmon were observed spawning in Silver Creek, near where the coal was spilled. Other marine species found in the area include coho salmon and rainbow trout.

A 2005 study conducted by the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research Ltd. found that unburnt coal introduced into marine environments would have physical effects on organisms, including abrasion, smothering, and clogging of respiratory and feeding organs. Speaking to the *Straight* shortly after the accident, Kevin Washbrook of Voters Taking Action on Climate Change called attention to the fact that the spilled coal was on its way to Neptune Terminals in North Vancouver.

“Last January in 2013, the port authority pushed through expansion plans that could mean up to a tripling of coal exports at Neptune,” Washbrook said.