

NEWS LOCAL

ENVIRONMENT

Lawsuit seeks to stop U.S. loan guarantee for coal exports

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As a registered nurse at Sentara Norfolk General Hospital for more than 20 years, Lorraine Ortega has noticed more and more patients with serious asthma who need treatment.

"I was alarmed by the increased number of acute asthmatics in our area, as well as people actually being diagnosed with lung cancer when they're non-smokers," Ortega said.

One of those acute asthmatics happens to be Ortega's daughter, who's wound up several times in the emergency room. Ortega says she's also had her own share of "really, really bad lung congestion" and pulmonary issues, even though she, too, is a non-smoker. She didn't have such problems before moving from Brooklyn to Chesapeake in 1999.

She believes the culprit is coal. Ortega lives half a mile from the Norfolk Southern Railway tracks, which routinely are used to transport coal to Norfolk for export, and she works within a mile of the company's coal terminal at Lam-berts Point.

"I don't have any research to indicate what is the real causative factor," Ortega says. "But I am concerned that the local health has taken a toll."

She's concerned enough that on Wednesday she became a prime exhibit for six environmental groups that filed a groundbreaking lawsuit to stop the federal government from financing overseas exports of Appalachian coal until a study determines the potential risks to health and the environment from mines, rail transport and overseas shipping.

The coalition contends the U.S. Export-Import Bank, known as Ex-Im Bank, guaranteed \$90 million in loans to Xcel Energy & Resources without first considering the environmental impact, as required under the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA. Ex-Im Bank is a federal agency that promotes exports abroad.

The loan guarantee was approved in May 2012 and is ex-



Kinder Morgan Pier IX is one of two coal terminals in Newport News.

pected to help leverage about a billion dollars in coal exports from Hampton Roads and Baltimore to markets in Asia — mainly China — and Italy, the coalition says.

"Ex-Im Bank turned a blind eye to the toxic coal dust, heavy train traffic and disruptive noise that our members living near ports and railroads experience on a daily basis," Diana Daschle-Joffe, senior attorney at the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, or CCAN, said in announcing the lawsuit. "People on the front lines of the U.S. coal export boom deserve to know the risks and to have a say over whether their tax dollars finance it."

No one from Xcel, based in Latrobe, Pa., was available to comment on the lawsuit Wednesday. According to its website, the company supplies coal to customers worldwide from ports in Hampton Roads and Baltimore.

Newport News has two coal export terminals, both in the southeast community. Combined, they have a total capacity of just under 39 million tons, according to David Host, president of T. Parker Host, a regional shipping agency based in Norfolk.

Residents in the southeast community — including Mayor McKinley Price — as well as health advocates have complained for years about coal dust and its adverse health effects.

Even now, health symposiums are being held in the low-income community to educate residents about how their environment might be affecting them. Among the concerns are the coal yards and commercial port operations.

The symposiums, called "Is My Neighborhood Killing Me?" are funded by a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant and held by the Southeast CARE coalition aimed at residents in the 23605 and 23607 ZIP codes. Old Dominion University is partnering to conduct resident surveys and data analysis.

According to the Virginia Department of Health, residents of the southeast community suffer disproportionately from asthma, diabetes and cardiovascular issues and have a lower life expectancy than the state average.

The next symposium is set for Aug. 31 at Downing-Gross Cultural Arts Center, 2410 Wickham Ave. in Newport News. The scheduled

keynote speaker is Mayor Price.

Groups partnering in the lawsuit are CCAN, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, Friends of the Earth, Pacific Environment, Sierra Club and the Center for International Environmental Law. They are represented by Earthjustice.

Norfolk is the largest export facility in the country, processing up to half of all coal exports since 2000, according to CCAN. Last year, the facility exported nearly 50 million tons of coal, or nearly 40 percent of the national total. According to Host, the facility has a capacity of 38 million tons.

New Orleans is the country's second biggest export terminal, followed by Baltimore.

While U.S. coal consumption is decreasing in this country, coal exports are growing at more than 20 million tons annually, CCAN says. In 2012, coal exports peaked at 126 million tons — the highest level ever, and more than triple the amount exported in 2002. Exports have since shown a decline from that peak level.

Price Salesky contributed to this report.

HAMPTON ROADS

AAA: Gas prices drop, but not here

New transportation bill may be the cause

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Gas prices have dipped slightly in Hampton Roads, falling by an average of three cents per gallon in the past week.

But Hampton Roads motorists are paying slightly more than other drivers around the state. The average price of a gallon of unleaded fuel in Hampton Roads is \$3.55, compared to \$3.47 statewide. The national average for a gallon of gas is \$3.62.

Georgeanne Blumling, a spokeswoman for AAA Tidewater Virginia, said the relatively higher Hampton Roads prices are the first indicators that the new transportation legislation signed by Gov. Bob McDonnell is possibly driving up the cost of gas. "It's been happening since July 1," Blumling said. "There's the extra 2.1 percent tax in our area, and we think that's what's caused the change."

Still, motorists will likely see some relief at the pump this week, Blumling said.

The recent decline in prices offers a small but welcomed relief ahead of August vacations," she added.

AAA said in its news release that motorists are paying 10 cents less for gas than they were in 2011 and 20 cents less than the all-time record set for this week of \$3.83 in 2008.

AAA projects gas prices will slowly go up for the rest of the summer because of an increase in demand for gasoline, the high cost of crude oil and the looming threat of hurricane season disrupting Gulf Coast oil refineries.

AAA noted that crude oil prices have dropped somewhat from the high this year of \$108.05 per barrel recorded on July 19. But the auto club said continued unrest in the Middle East, in particular Egypt and Libya, continue to affect the world market.

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