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Agencies set scope of environmental impact statement for proposed Cherry Point export project

SEATTLE – An environmental review of proposed bulk cargo and railroad spur projects at Cherry Point in Whatcom County will closely study their direct effects at the site and evaluate a broad range of indirect and cumulative impacts likely to occur within and beyond Washington.

Whatcom County, the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) – known together as the co-leads – are producing a joint Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal and BNSF Railway (BNSF) Custer Spur track expansion.

The Gateway Pacific Terminal – proposed by Pacific International Terminals – would provide storage and handling of exported dry bulk commodities, including coal, grain, iron ore, salts and alumina. To support the Gateway Pacific Terminal and other industries at Cherry Point, BNSF proposes to add rail facilities and install a second track along its 6-mile branch line.

At full capacity, the shipping terminal would export 54 million metric tons per year of bulk commodities – including up to 48 million metric tons per year of coal – and could generate 18 train trips (9 round trips) per day and more than 18 deep-draft “Capesize” vessel trips per week.

Whatcom County and Ecology must follow the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), and the Corps must follow the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The joint process enables the co-lead agencies to avoid duplication when the two laws overlap and to meet each statute’s separate requirements.

The NEPA co-lead agency (Corps) and the SEPA co-lead agencies (Whatcom County and Ecology) have independently determined the preliminary scope, or subject matter, it will require in the EIS:

NEPA: Corps

The Corps has issued a [Memorandum for the Record](#) (pdf) documenting its determinations regarding the scope of study for the EIS under NEPA. The memo’s instructions require an extensive analysis of the projects’ on-site and nearby impacts, including environmental effects on wetland, shoreline and inter-tidal areas, water and air quality, cultural and archeological resources, fish and wildlife, noise and vibration, among other possible effects. The Corps will also conduct a detailed evaluation of vessel traffic to a point 8 miles west of the J Buoy offshore of Cape Flattery.

SEPA: Whatcom County and Ecology

The SEPA lead agencies have determined that the preliminary scope of the project impacts will be examined fully under all applicable environmental elements which include earth, air, water, plants and animals, energy and natural resources, environmental health, land and shoreline use, transportation, and public services and utilities.

Whatcom County and Ecology will require:

- A detailed assessment of rail transportation impacts in Whatcom County near the project site, specifically including Bellingham and Ferndale.
- An assessment of how the project would affect human health, including impacts from related rail and vessel transportation in Whatcom County.
- An evaluation of greenhouse gas emissions from terminal operations, and rail and vessel traffic.

In addition, Ecology will require:

- A detailed assessment of rail transportation on other representative communities in Washington and a general analysis of out-of-state rail impacts.
- An assessment of how the project would affect human health in Washington.
- A general assessment of cargo-ship impacts beyond Washington waters.
- An evaluation and disclosure of greenhouse gas emissions of end-use coal combustion.

The combined EIS will address all of the co-lead agencies' scoping requirements. The co-lead agencies could revise the scope for the draft EIS in response to new findings or other information as development of the draft EIS moves forward. The co-leads will seek public comment on a draft of the EIS, which they expect will take about two years to prepare. Then they will prepare a joint final EIS.

The joint EIS will inform the public and decision makers about the impacts of the proposed projects. It will identify the potential environmental impacts from the proposed projects and various alternatives, and discuss possible mitigation measures.

The EIS will disclose the extent to which information in the joint document is for NEPA analysis and/or SEPA analysis only. It is up to each co-lead agency to determine the relevance and weight the information in the EIS will be given by each co-lead agency when making its own agency determinations, based on each agency's respective statutes, responsibilities, and legal requirements.

Other agencies making permit decisions must follow separate requirements that may dictate the range and type of information they may consider.

The co-lead agencies reviewed and considered approximately 125,000 comments received during a 121-day public comment period last fall and winter on the scope for the EIS. [A report](#) previously posted online summarizes and categorizes those comments.

The official joint EIS website, www.eisgatewaypacificwa.gov, provides the co-lead agencies' scope-related documents, additional details about the scoping process, project proposals, and displays comments received.

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Media Contacts:

- Whatcom County: Tyler Schroeder, 360-676-6907, tschroed@co.whatcom.wa.us
- Ecology: Dustin Terpening, [@ecynorth](https://twitter.com/ecynorth) (Twitter), 360-510-0682, dustin.terpening@ecy.wa.gov
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Patricia Graesser, 206-764-3750, patricia.graesser@us.army.mil

For more information:

- Official EIS website: <http://www.eisgatewaypacificwa.gov/>
- Ecology: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/geographic/gatewaypacific/>
- Whatcom County: <http://www.co.whatcom.wa.us/pds/plan/current/gpt-ssa/index.jsp>
- Army Corps of Engineers: <http://www.nws.usace.army.mil>