

Mosier Train Derailment and Oil Spill



On Friday, June 3, a 97-car train operated by Union Pacific carrying Bakken crude oil from North Dakota derailed in Mosier, Oregon. Four of the cars ruptured, with one spilling its entire load, two spilling part of their loads, and one leaking. Bakken crude oil is more explosive than gasoline, so as a precaution, I-84 was shut down and parts of the town were evacuated. The blast radius for this volume of Bakken crude could have reached up to a mile. First responders were able to put out the fires and keep the tanks cool enough to prevent a much greater disaster.

“It was heartening to see federal, state and local agencies and resources quickly respond to what could have been a great conflagration,” said Gary Burke, Chairman of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees. “We are thankful this event did not result in any loss of life or catastrophic environmental damage. Train shipments of Bakken crude oil through the environmentally fragile Columbia River Gorge have the potential to do incredible damage. Each train can contain upwards of three million gallons of crude oil.”

Approximately 42 thousand gallons of Bakken crude oil was spilled into the environment. Ten thousand gallons flowed into a manhole

connected to the Mosier wastewater treatment plant, leaving 32 thousand gallons unaccounted for. Given this type of crude oil, the US Environmental Protection Agency expected around 40 percent of the spilled oil to evaporate within 24 hours. Even with this rate of evaporation, it would still result in over 19 thousand gallons seeping into the ground, where evaporation is halted or slowed considerably.

“For years, the tribes have been a part of the chorus of voices telling of the danger and risks posed by fossil fuel transportation through the Columbia River Gorge,” remarked CRITFC Executive Director Paul Lumley. “Unfortunately today those worries have been validated. Every day, fossil fuel transportation through this ecologically and culturally important area risks the health, safety, and economic security of those living along the river. Tribal members fishing on the Columbia face even larger risks and potential impacts. Not only are they exposed day in and day out to the air and water in and along the Columbia, these families eat diets heavy in fish caught from the river at risk.”



The burned hillside across the road from the derailment site.

The morning after the spill, a slight oil sheen was detected on the Columbia River near the mouth of Rock Creek. Oil absorbing booms were deployed



to contain and collect the oil and the sheen disappeared later in the day. Rock Creek is currently dry, so officials believe the oil was discharged from the wastewater treatment plant before the facility was shut down.

The Monday following the spill, the Yakama Nation held a blessing and drum ceremony on the river, followed by a press conference in Mosier. Tribal Chairs from the Yakama, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Swinomish tribes spoke, along with the Yakama Nation General Council chairman. Yakama Nation Tribal Council Chairman JoDe Goudy called for a halt to all fossil fuel transportation through the Columbia River Gorge. He said, "The oil train derailment threatens our very way of life. The oil seeping into the Columbia is a reminder that these accidents will happen, putting our guaranteed fishing rights at risk."

Chairman Goudy also noted that the press conference was taking place on the 161st anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of 1855 between the Yakama Nation and the United States government. "Our ancestors made sacrifices in exchange for these inherent rights guaranteed by our treaties and agreements with the United States," said Goudy. "The pollution caused by oil spills threatens our fish and risks violating all of our treaty rights."

"Our fishing rights are under assault from negligent industry who are more concerned about their bottom line than protecting our lands and waters," said Goudy. "We will stand together to speak for those things that cannot speak for themselves. We will stand together to protect our lands, our waters and our rights."



Yakama Nation Chairman JoDe Goudy and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. at the Yakama Nation press conference in Mosier.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr, Chief Prosecuting Attorney for Riverkeeper and President and Senior Attorney for the Waterkeeper Alliance also spoke. He listed many of the dangers associated with fossil fuels and fossil fuel transport. "This is a chemical attack on our communities," he said. "We need to treat fossil fuel risks like we treat terrorist risks." He also spoke on how dangerous it is to be moving millions of gallons of explosive materials along the Gorge every day. "These trains are so dangerous they should be called bomb trains."



Booms on the Columbia River at the mouth of Rock Creek to absorb oil that escaped the Mosier wastewater treatment plant. The day after the spill, an oil sheen was spotted near the outfall pipe from the treatment plant. The booms are made of a material that absorbs oil. By afternoon, the sheen was gone, but the booms were left up as a precaution. Fortunately the wastewater treatment plant was shut off quickly enough to avoid discharging much oil directly into the river, however there is still considerable concern that oil spilled into the soil will wash down into the groundwater and eventually make its way into the Columbia.

The spill cleanup effort initially focused on clearing and repairing the tracks. The damaged oil cars, still containing oil, were moved to the side of the tracks to allow train traffic to pass. The City of Mosier passed a resolution halting all train traffic through the community until the derailed trains had been cleared away and the remediation effort was finished. This resolution was non-binding, however, as federal rail regulations don't allow communities or states from interfering with interstate rail traffic. The rail cars had been cleared from the area by Tuesday, June 7. The next step was soil removal from the area next to the tracks to prevent the oil from getting washed into the groundwater and flowing into the Columbia River, however authorities offered no assurances that this effort would be completely effective, particularly if heavy rains fell that could wash the oil deeper into the soil.

"This train derailment and spill shows the catastrophic environmental risks that fossil fuel transportation along the Columbia River poses," remarked Lumley. "The accident is a reminder that we should be reducing, not increasing the number of oil and coal trains along the river. If projects like the currently proposed Tesoro-Savage oil terminal or Millennium Bulk coal terminal are allowed to move forward, today's accident will only be the first of what could be many more to come. We cannot stand idly by to this danger to the river, the salmon, and the people and communities who rely on them." 🙏

Spring Fishery Review and Summer Fishery Update

by Stuart Ellis, CRITFC Harvest Specialist

We are currently in the Summer Fishery Management Period. The final spring chinook run size is still being calculated but it will be about 187,000 at the river mouth. This year's run came in about as close to the pre-season forecast of 188,800 as anyone can remember. It will take a while to finalize all of the harvest data, but it appears the tribal fishery came in very close to the management limit. The tribes cut off sales at the end of the spring period to try to reduce catch rates enough to keep the fishery within its limit. Sales restarted with the start of the summer management period on June 16.

The forecast for upper Columbia summer chinook is high. We expect a run of 93,300. The sockeye forecast was 101,600 which is down from recent years, however more than a quarter million had already passed Bonneville by June 27. The run sizes will be updated in late June and both treaty and non-treaty fisheries are managed on the same actual river mouth run sizes. The forecasts primarily serve as tools to plan early season fisheries. The tribes have set three commercial gillnet fishing periods and expect to set more. Announcements will be made as the tribes plan the rest of the summer season.

Summer season fisheries can be tricky to manage because of the very low allowed harvest rate on sockeye.

This is required because of the status of Snake River sockeye, which can be caught throughout the run. We are only expecting 2,100 Snake River sockeye to enter the Columbia this year. The allowed sockeye harvest rate for tribal fisheries is 7 percent. The harvest rate (1 percent) is lower for non-treaty fisheries downstream of the Snake. The tribes have decided to use a 7-inch minimum mesh size limit in their gillnet fisheries which helps reduce the rate harvest of the overall tribal sockeye catch, but a large proportion of the total tribal sockeye catch occurs in the platform and hook-and-line fisheries. This pattern in gear selectivity is reversed for chinook in the summer. The large majority of chinook are caught in the gillnet fishery. In order to make sure both fisheries can stay open as long as possible through the summer and make it possible to catch all of the allowed upper Columbia summer chinook, we have to make sure the overall tribal fishery stays within its sockeye harvest rate limit. The upper Columbia summer chinook are a healthy run with no ESA-listed groups, so the harvest rate is relatively high. The allowed harvest rate varies with the run size, but we expect it to be over 30 percent. The tribes want to make sure that fishers can catch all these chinook, especially since this is very important fishery economically. 🍣



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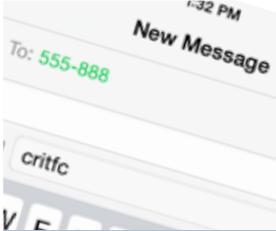
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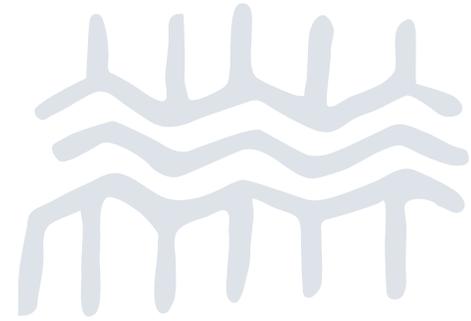
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Taking Care of the Oceans

Since time immemorial, tribes have followed well-worn trails to get to traditional fishing, hunting, and gathering grounds, afterward following these same trails to get back home. The Columbia River tribes taught that rivers and streams are the trails that salmon use on their journey to their traditional hunting grounds: the ocean. After several years, they follow those trails home, bringing the sea's bounty back with them. Thanks to the heroic efforts and sacrifice of the salmon to make this journey, people, animals, and plants hundreds of miles from the coast can take part in the richness that the ocean provides.

June 8 was World Oceans Day, a day to reflect on the earth's absolute dependence on the oceans to make the planet suitable for life. Oceans are home to millions of species of plants and animals. They provide us with food. They provide the water for the cycle that brings freshwater onto land in the form of rain and snow. They are the lungs of Mother Earth, providing 70 percent of the oxygen in the atmosphere. Healthy oceans are critical to regulating the planet's climate.

When the oceans suffer, it isn't just a problem for people living and fishing along the coasts. The oxygen we breathe connects us with the ocean. The rain and snow that fall on us connect us

with the ocean. The rivers and streams that flow through our communities connect us with the ocean. The returning salmon connect us with the ocean.

The problems the oceans currently face require a response on a massive scale. It will take concerted efforts from all levels of the world's nations and actions by international, national, tribal, state, and local governments. The Columbia River tribes are playing a role, working on habitat improvement and river restoration projects to care for and restore damaged rivers and streams that flow through their homelands and eventually to the ocean.

If we all commit to meaningful action to protect the future health of oceans, both by our individual actions and advocating for broader governmental actions, we can show the oceans and water the gratitude they deserve for sustaining all life on our planet. 🌊



A school of sardines, an important food for salmon during their time in the ocean.

Photo: California Dept. of Fish and Wildlife.