

Guest opinion: The proposed Uinta Basin railway will prevent progress in rural communities

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Utah's economy is among the strongest and most diverse in the country, but the oil-dependent Uinta Basin is being left behind.

A proposed \$1.5 billion railway, which could purportedly quadruple oil production in the basin's Uintah and Duchesne counties, will only make things worse.

Transportation issues have capped the amount of oil coming out of the basin. Proponents of the Uinta Basin Railway make all kinds of claims about the jobs, tax revenues and other benefits that would supposedly come from lifting that cap with a new railroad.

Left out of the conversation is what happens to communities that rely on boom-and-bust fossil fuel economies. It's not a pretty picture.

Despite a statewide 68% increase in oil production between 2008 and 2018, the economies of Uintah and Duchesne counties have not fared well.

State data shows employment in Uintah and Duchesne counties has cratered by 18.2 and 7.4%, respectively, following the 2008 recession, even as Utah topped the charts nationwide for employment growth.

The proposed Uinta Basin Railway would double down on this unhealthy dependence on oil. It would benefit oil companies at the expense of struggling rural communities.

Let's be clear: The Uinta Basin Railway is all about oil. Its backers have never claimed that trains will move people, and mentions of agricultural products and other freight only come as afterthoughts.

The most recent plans show the railroad servicing two isolated locations in the basin: The doorstep of oil producer Newfield Exploration Co. near Myton, and the little-known proposed Uintah Advantage oil refinery at Leland Bench.

Proponents say the railway will transport 130,000 to 350,000 barrels of oil per day from the Uintah Basin to the Gulf Coast, where it could be shipped overseas. At those quantities, rail capacity would basically be exhausted, making clear that the railway is being designed for the oil industry alone.

Currently oil reserves in the Uinta Basin are being depleted by approximately 85,000 barrels per day. Eventually, the oil will run out. The Uinta Basin Railway will make it run out three or four times faster.

What then for these rural communities?

For starters, they will be grappling with escalating environmental and public health costs from generations of oil and gas extraction. The region is already choking on some of the worst air pollution in the country. The railway and oil boom would ensure that it gets far worse.

Without other types of employment, the end of Uinta Basin oil production will also devastate these communities' economies.

It doesn't have to be this way. Inspiring initiatives across Utah are striving to diversify and boost local economies so they're in shape to weather the next inevitable bust. That's not just good for these rural towns and their residents, but also for the state as a whole.

A great example is the Utah Coal Country Strike Team, which is helping to redefine and revitalize economies in Carbon and Emery counties as the coal market steadily declines. The team focuses on workforce retraining, housing investment, tourism infrastructure and economic development incentives.

At Utah State University, the Rural Online Initiative offers a certificate program to give people with access to good phone and internet service an entry to the vast amount of work increasingly happening online. The program helps rural residents find ways to make money online and learn the skills they need to be successful.

Transitioning to a clean, sustainable economy is not only possible, it's necessary for our health and well-being and the survival of the planet.

Recently I heard a former Kentucky coal worker talk about his career transition. He said the coal towns were held hostage by the coal companies, with other economic opportunities foreclosed and workers essentially stuck. Today this former coal miner works on initiatives that bring clean drinking water and energy efficiency measures to those same communities.

We must focus on diversifying rural economies rather than making the Uinta Basin more beholden to the oil industry and the fickle global price of oil.

The Uinta Basin Railway would be an expensive, misguided project with dangerous statewide, national and global consequences. Let's work together to chart a smarter, safer, more resilient path forward.

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