

Deeda Seed and John Weisheit: Railway for oil diverts millions from Utah communities

A state fund that is supposed to clean up the mess from fossil fuels should not be used to do more damage.

By Deeda Seed and John Weisheit | Special to The Tribune

Jan. 22, 2021, 11:00 a.m.

What would \$28 million buy for the people of Uintah County? Fire trucks, flood control and road construction projects for starters. Ditto for Duchesne County residents, and throw in a community center, baseball fields and sewer lines.

Utah's Permanent Community Impact Board has dedicated public funds to support these much-needed projects, but in recent years the board has taken a wrong turn. It's handed over nearly \$28 million in public money to the [Seven County Infrastructure Coalition](#) in hopes of ramming an 88-mile railroad through these rural counties and significantly increasing fossil-fuel extraction in the Uinta Basin.

Now that wrong turn looks like a dead end, with some of Utah's hardest-hit communities paying the price.

The board is responsible for distributing royalties from oil, gas and mineral extraction on federal lands back to communities that have been impacted by that extraction. Money that should be used for [public projects](#) is instead subsidizing private oil drilling, a violation of state law. Instead of going to public safety or clean energy, this money is fattening the coffers of investment firms, engineering companies, consultants and lawyers.

That's why the Center for Biological Diversity and Living Rivers are suing the board and the coalition. Three-fourths of the \$28 million grant has already been spent, but a court could stop the hemorrhaging of public dollars on the proposed [Uinta Basin Railway](#).

And Utahns can raise their voices. A [public comment period](#) on a new federal environmental analysis ends Jan. 28.

If the railway is built, the analysis — though sorely lacking — admits that more than 400 streams will be destroyed. More than 10,000 acres of wildlife habitat will be stripped bare or paved over, including crucial areas that pronghorn and mule deer need to

survive. In Emma Park, noisy bulldozers and train traffic will drive imperiled greater sage-grouse out of their mating and nesting grounds.

The study fails to acknowledge the devastation the Uinta Basin Railway will inflict on air, water and wildlife by ramping up oil production, and the plan lacks meaningful protections for them.

If the railway is built, up to five two-mile-long trains hauling 350,000 barrels of crude oil — four times the amount currently trucked to Salt Lake City — could leave the Uinta Basin each day. These Gulf Coast exports will add to the 80,000 barrels of oil trucked daily to Salt Lake City refineries.

People in this rural region already suffer air quality as bad as Los Angeles because of decades of drilling, and the basin routinely violates federal clean air standards. Ozone pollution can cause reduced lung function and asthma attacks, causing visits to emergency rooms and even premature death.

More drilling will make things worse.

If all that weren't bad enough, follow the money. A cadre of well-connected firms are reaping millions to usher this boondoggle through the permitting and environmental review process.

But the financing for this \$1.5 billion railway simply doesn't pencil out. Utahns will lose \$28 million of public funds if the developer, Drexel Hamilton, walks away as its contract with the coalition allows.

Utah deserves better. The people of Uintah and Duchesne counties, who would bear the brunt of this railway's destruction, need support to transition away from the dirty, unpredictable fossil-fuel economy to a clean, renewable energy future.

The law says Utah's Permanent Community Impact Board must use these public funds to repair damage done by the fossil fuel industry. The board should follow the law, seize the opportunity to steer a new course and invest wisely in a fossil-free future.

Deeda Seed, a former Salt Lake City councilmember, is the Center for Biological Diversity's Utah campaigner.

John Weisheit is the conservation director of Living Rivers and the Colorado Riverkeeper (a member of the Waterkeeper Alliance movement).