

March 22, 2022

Tom Vilsack, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250
Email: agsec@usda.gov

Re: Oil Trains from Uinta Basin Railway Threaten Gulf Coast Communities, Cause More Environmental Injustice

Secretary Vilsack:

We are writing to express our opposition to a proposed railway right-of-way over Forest Service land in Utah that is projected to directly impact our Gulf Coast communities resulting in up to 108 million barrels of Uinta Basin waxy crude oil per year being transported via rail to Gulf Coast refineries.

For perspective, the 350,000 barrels per day of increased production that the rail line will induce amounts to 127 million barrels a year. That's about 40% of the 860,000 barrels per day the [Keystone XL pipeline](#) was supposed to carry.

The Surface Transportation Board's [environmental impact statement](#) (EIS) projects that 85% of oil shipped over the rail line – up to 297,500 barrels per day, or up to 108 million barrels per year – will be delivered to Gulf Coast refineries, with about 45 million barrels estimated to be delivered to Louisiana area refineries (including potentially the Calumet refinery in Shreveport, the Exxon Mobil refinery in Baton Rouge, and the Marathon refinery in Garyville).¹ In addition, several infrastructure groups have advertised plans to ship this waxy oil to Ironton in District 7 Plaquemines Parish, a historic African American community still recovering from hurricane Ida, and currently threatened with the air pollution from a multitude of crude oil, pet coke, methane gas, and methanol proposals.

Our communities have suffered for years from the environmental injustice inflicted by the fossil fuel industry, and we have worked hard to reduce the disproportionate burdens of pollution and environmental injustice on our communities caused by the fossil fuel industry. The massive influx of oil via train from Utah will only make our situation worse.

Oil trains traveling to our communities are polluting themselves. They also threaten spills that could harm our communities, pollute the land and destroy wildlife habitat. Increased deliveries of crude oil to refineries in the Gulf Coast will result in more toxic air pollution that can cause cancer, birth defects and chronic conditions like asthma. These are harms that people in our community already experience at much higher rates than in other places due to the fossil fuel industry's extensive operations in our region.

The Surface Transportation Board's EIS failed to address any of these damaging impacts, nor did it address the environmental justice implications of the project for our region. As far as we know, none of the agencies relying on the EIS to support the rail line – including the Surface Transportation Board or the Forest Service – came to our communities to inform us of these threats or to seek our feedback on the project. In short, it appears that our communities have once again been neglected and ignored when it comes to federal decisions that could damage our health and our lives.

¹ Final EIS, [Appendix C](#) at pp. C-3 - C-4; Final EIS, [Appendix T](#) at p. T-37.

We hope you will take our concerns seriously and reject this project. If the Forest Service still intends to approve it, it can't do so until the agency takes a hard look at what millions more barrels of oil being refined literally in our backyards will do to our health and welfare.

We invite you and your staff to come to visit us to see the challenges our community faces, and to understand how we are working to stop further environmental injustice.

Sincerely,

Scott Eustis
Community Science Director
Healthy Gulf
935 Gravier, Suite 700
New Orleans, LA 70112
scotteustis@healthygulf.org
(504) 484-9599

Jordan Brewington
Reparative Justice Fellow
Louisiana Bucket Brigade
3416 B Canal Street
New Orleans, LA 70119
jordan@labucketbrigade.org
(504) 484-3433

Jo Banner
Founder
The Descendants Project
5593 Highway 18
Vacherie, LA 70090
(225) 2061993
Jo@thedescendantsproject.org

Virginia Richard
Gulf Program Manager
SouthWings
virginia@southwings.org

Renate Heurich
Vice President
350 New Orleans
renate@350neworleans.org

Peter Digre
Chair
Climate Reality NOLA
2833 St. Charles Ave
New Orleans LA 70115
310-346-4361
peterdigre@gmail.com

Sharon Lavigne
RISE St. James
sharonclavigne@gmail.com

Cc: Katharine Ferguson, Chief of Staff, Office of the Secretary, katharine.ferguson@usda.gov
Sean Babington, Senior Climate Advisor, Office of the Secretary, Sean.babington@usda.gov
Meryl Harrel, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, meryl.harrell@usda.gov