

Forest Service Should Reject The Uinta Basin Railway Permit; Oil Train Will Worsen the Climate Crisis, Threaten the Colorado River and Frontline Communities

The Uinta Basin Railway is intended to quadruple crude oil production in Utah's Uinta Basin. The 88-mile railway would go from Myton, UT to Kyune, UT, and is predicted to ramp up crude oil production by as much as 400% in the Uinta Basin by providing a new and cheaper way to transport oil outside the Basin. The Surface Transportation Board [approved](#) the railway in December 2021, but proponents still must get a right-of-way permit from the Forests Service to construct the line through inventoried roadless areas in the Ashley National Forest in Utah. The Forest Service should reject the permit because it is not in the public interest. The railway will:

Significantly Worsen the Climate Crisis

A conservative estimate says the project will cause up to 53 million tons of CO2 pollution per year from the combustion of the increased production of up to 350,000 barrels of oil per day. That amounts to 127 million barrels a year, about 40% of what the [Keystone XL pipeline](#) was supposed to carry. Burning that oil would generate emissions equal to the 6 largest power plants in Utah.

As another point of comparison, the President's offshore wind energy plan calls for installing 30 megawatts of wind, which is estimated to avoid [78 million tons](#) of CO2 emissions by 2030. Those emissions reductions could be totally undone before 2030 by a mere year and a half of increased oil production made possible by the Uinta Basin Railway.

Threaten the Colorado River, Communities with Spills, Reduced Flows

Rising temperatures, loss of snowpack, and a millenia-worst drought are reducing water flow in the Colorado River, triggering the first declared water shortage and mandatory cutbacks by the federal government in 2021. **Burning more Uinta basin oil will only worsen already diminishing streamflows with immense consequences for all water users in Colorado.** With each additional 1 degree Celsius (1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) of warming, the Colorado River's average [flow drops by 9.3%](#). Colorado River flows could be up to [one-third less](#) than the current average within a generation, unless meaningful and immediate reductions in carbon emissions are achieved.

Up to 1,600 loaded oil trains per year leaving the Uinta Basin would travel for 200 miles in Colorado immediately adjacent to the Colorado River, source of drinking water for 40 million people. The heavy, long oil tanker trains used to transport crude oil pose greater risks of derailment and spills than other freight trains, and an increased risk of fire due to derailment and spilling of combustible oil. Further, climate change induced drought, due primarily to burning of fossil fuels, is resulting in more severe wildfires across the West. For these reasons, dozens of Colorado local governments concerned about [climate change](#) and [water pollution](#) have pressed the Forest Service to reject the right of way, and Eagle County, Colorado has filed [a lawsuit](#) challenging the Surface Transportation Board's approval.

Not Alleviate High Gas Prices, or Address Dependence on Russian Oil

First, at the earliest, the rail line wouldn't be complete [until late 2024](#), and that assumes project proponents raise the \$1.35 billion necessary for construction. It is unclear when increased production could start.

Second, oil company CEOs are motivated by maximizing profits and generating cash for shareholders, not by what keeps prices down at home. Oil and gas are [traded on global markets](#), and [unlike clean energy sources](#), fossil fuels can easily be loaded onto a boat and [shipped to the highest bidder](#). Because of this, we will never be free from oil and gas price fluctuations no matter how much oil we drill at home.

The real solution to high gas prices and not being held hostage by petrostate oligarchs is to rapidly transition off fossil fuels and power our economy with clean renewable energy. The Uinta Basin oil train will only deepen our dependence on fossil fuels and delay our renewable energy transition.

Increase Air Pollution in the Uinta Basin and in Northwest Colorado

The Uinta Basin Railway is designed to quadruple the rate of oil production in the Basin. That oil production will increase air pollution in an area already [designated](#) as being in “marginal nonattainment” for ozone, the main ingredient in smog, a significant [human health](#) threat. Pollution in the Basin, largely the result of drilling, already spreads into the Rangely area in Rio Blanco County and beyond, leading to higher levels of ozone in Colorado.

Potentially Trigger the Reopening of the Tennessee Pass Rail Line, Threatening Browns Canyon National Monument

The Colorado, Midland & Pacific Railway Company—a wholly owned subsidiary of Rio Grande Pacific, the proposed operator of the Uinta Basin Railway—proposed reactivation of the Tennessee Pass Line in 2020. Construction of the Uinta Basin Railway and reopening of the Tennessee Pass Line could result in crude oil trains traversing the Arkansas River Valley and Browns Canyon National Monument, threatening significant harm to these sensitive resources and recreational tourism.

Inflict More Harm on Communities Already Suffering Disproportionately from Environmental Injustice

The crude oil from the Uinta Basin would be destined for refineries many hundreds of miles further east. The Environmental Impact Statement predicts that 85% of the oil transported via the Uinta Basin Railway is destined for refineries in Houston and Port Arthur, Texas, or in Louisiana's “Cancer Alley,” where fence-line communities of color already suffer a disproportionate burden of pollution from existing petroleum processing plants. The air pollution and health impacts these communities will face because of the increased oil refining will only occur because of drilling induced by the Uinta Basin Railway.

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