

Guest Opinion:

We can create infrastructure jobs without jeopardizing our future

By Sen. Jeff Merkley

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When Jordan Cove LNG announced its plan in 2012 for a liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminal in Coos Bay, it painted a compelling picture. The project would create hundreds of construction jobs and improve port infrastructure in a region hit hard by the loss of sawmills and canneries. Simultaneously it would lessen the carbon dioxide pollution driving climate disruption by replacing higher-polluting coal.

To my concern about the rights of landowners in the path of the 230-mile gas pipeline to Coos Bay, the company responded that it would secure right-of-way through negotiated compensation rather than seizing land through eminent domain.

Based on this 2012 vision, I concluded that Coos Bay should have a fair chance to make its case as the best location for an LNG terminal.

Five years later, the project has changed and the world has changed, meriting examining the project anew. The question isn't whether we need to build infrastructure — we need to invest massively to remedy the neglect of the past four decades — but whether this large-scale fossil fuel project still makes sense.

It is still true that the project would create hundreds of good-paying construction jobs, strengthen union pension funds and train apprentices.

The project would pay property taxes along the pipeline, and roughly double Coos County tax revenues, with a significant share going to public schools. The project would improve Port of Coos Bay infrastructure, including dredging that might make the port viable for other enterprises.

These remain powerful benefits. But other factors have changed considerably.

The company has reduced the number of affected landowners along the pipeline, but after five years it is still holding over the heads of landowners the possibility of seizing land through eminent domain. As I have maintained from the beginning, it is unacceptable to use eminent domain — a power designed to accomplish critical public projects — to advance a foreign-owned, private, for-profit project.

The project's pollution profile has also changed. In 2012 the company touted its intention to procure clean, offshore wind energy to help power the terminal. That option is no longer on the table. As now planned, the terminal would become the largest carbon polluter in Oregon, with emissions equivalent to putting half a million gas-powered cars on the road.

And it is no longer true that the LNG shipped to Asia would reduce pollution. Since 2012 we have learned more about natural gas escaping from fracking fluids and gas pipelines, which by many estimates makes it at least as carbon-polluting as coal. When that LNG is burned in Asia, it would generate carbon pollution equal to an additional 3 million gas-powered cars on the road.

Additionally, global energy markets have evolved dramatically. Non-carbon alternatives such as solar and wind are now highly competitive. With a renewable energy future within reach, [it makes little sense to help Asia leap from coal to natural gas, locking in carbon pollution for decades.](#)

That carbon pollution is a big deal because it is driving up global temperatures, with a new record virtually every month.

We are feeling the impact of climate disruption across Oregon. It has killed a billion baby oysters; disrupted our salmon fisheries; and generated worst-ever droughts, hurting farmers and ranchers. Our forests carry scars from the pine beetles and catastrophic wildfires, costing businesses and taxpayers millions.

These are not coincidental or temporary challenges. The whole planet is affected. Reports are pouring in of shrinking Arctic ice, disappearing glaciers, rising sea levels, dying coral, and powerful storms such as Harvey, Maria and Irma.

Locally and globally, we are paying the price of climate disruption. The price will go up exponentially if we don't rapidly transition from fossil fuels to clean and renewable sources.

I love the possibility of the Jordan Cove project creating so many good jobs, beneficial revenues, and improved infrastructure. This project would be an enormous boost to a community that has long suffered economically.

But I cannot turn away from the knowledge that, like other large-scale fossil fuel projects, Jordan Cove will contribute massively to pollution that is profoundly damaging our state and our world. Generations from now, our grandchildren will wonder why we continued to burn fossil fuels when the catastrophic consequences were so evident.

Thus, it becomes clear that we have to shift from building large-scale fossil fuel infrastructure, including Jordan Cove, and instead invest massively in building the enormous backlog of infrastructure projects that will improve our state and nation, not damage it.

We can energize our construction economy by building desperately needed drinking and wastewater systems; improved bridges, roads, docks, jetties and rail; electric lines; and rural broadband.

Powering up this construction economy, while driving a transition to renewable energy, will create millions of good-paying jobs while saving our planet from the ravages of climate disruption.

— Jeff Merkley represents Oregon in the U.S. Senate.