

Joann Varnell

As a Washington resident, I am concerned about the risks that tar sands crude oil poses to my community and communities across the state. I appreciate the work that the Department of Ecology has done thus far to improve oil spill prevention, preparedness, and response measures over the last several years, but am concerned that the proposed updates to Washingtons Oil Spill Contingency Plan Rule does not go far enough to protect us from a worst case scenario spill of tar sands crude oil.

Communities across Washington are already at risk from the existing transport of tar sands crude oil and we unprepared to respond. Currently tar sands are transported by rail through Eastern Washington and along the Columbia River, by barge across Puget Sound, and through the Puget Sound Pipeline across Whatcom and Skagit Counties. The proposed expansion of the Canadian Trans Mountain Pipeline would exacerbate these existing risks and increase the likelihood of a catastrophic oil spill of diluted bitumen. In addition to being one of the most climate-polluting fossil fuels on the planet, heavy tar sands crude oil sinks when spilled into the water and is virtually impossible to clean up, causing irreparable damage to our economy, communities, and endangered orcas and vulnerable ecosystems.

To address these risks, Ecology should require a fast, aggressive, and well-coordinated response to contain and recover potentially non-floating oils before they submerge and sink. The timeframes required in the draft rule provide no assurance that the current response times and capability will be sufficient to respond to a worst-case spill. Ecology should distinguish between all potentially non-floating oils and diluted bitumen, which is likely to sink quickly and therefore demands more stringent equipment and response time requirements.

Finally, I urge Ecology to enhance planning standards for wildlife response in the event of an oil spill. It is essential that wildlife response actions are initiated as soon as possible with adequate personnel and equipment. Deterrence actions that keep wildlife from entering a spill must be underway immediately after a spill. The Plan must require that the monitoring and deterrence operations apply to all killer whales. This will provide greater certainty that Southern Resident orcas will be deterred from entering an oil spill. I urge Ecology to exercise its full regulatory authority and establish stronger protections from tar sands oil that Washington needs and deserves.