



10-2023

Supply Chain Narratives in the Salish Sea's Transboundary Ecosystem: News Media and Public Positioning of the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 Expansion

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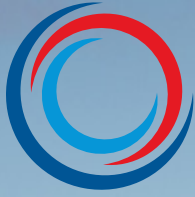
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Recommended Citation

Moscato, Derek, "Supply Chain Narratives in the Salish Sea's Transboundary Ecosystem: News Media and Public Positioning of the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 Expansion" (2023). *Institute Publications*. 35.
https://cedar.wwu.edu/salish_pubs/35

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emerging issues in the

Supply Chain Narratives in the Salish Sea Ecosystem:

News Media and Public Positioning of Roberts Bank Terminal 2

Derek Moscato¹

SUMMARY

The Vancouver Fraser Port Authority's proposed Roberts Bank Terminal 2 marine container facility in Delta, British Columbia, presents a narrative of economic opportunity and expansion for Canadian government and industry, and simultaneously has raised serious concerns in the transboundary Salish Sea watershed region about issues of sustainability, biodiversity, community impacts, and tribal rights. Ongoing media coverage of the yet-to-be-constructed project, which received federal government approval in April of 2023, has amplified the government's economic justification for the maritime infrastructure. Yet numerous news outlets have simultaneously raised concerns over short- and long-term ecological deterioration and negative impacts to local communities. This two-pronged narrative underscores a disconnect between the aspirations of Canada's federal government and the growing environmental concerns articulated by local and also transboundary constituencies in the Salish Sea watershed.

Roberts Bank Terminal 2: The Big Picture

On April 21, 2023, Canada's federal government gave its approval for building of the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 (RBT2) port facility in Delta, British Columbia, which will sit adjacent to the existing Roberts Bank twin-terminal. This planned expansion of the facility, located near the mouth of the Fraser River on the Strait of Georgia and the Salish Sea, will increase the cargo capacity at the port by more than 50 percent. The environmental impacts to adjacent marine life are seen as considerable, and the project is subject to 370 legally

binding conditions, including provisions for fish habitat and the protection of marine mammals.

In an issued statement, Canada's federal government noted that the expansion decision was only reached after considerable deliberation. "The approval of this project was not taken lightly," said Omar Alghabra, Canada's Minister of Transport. "With strong measures, we will protect our ecosystem while increasing Canada's supply chain capacity to ensure Canadians receive affordable goods on time while growing our economy and creating well-paying, middle-class jobs."

The Port of Vancouver is considered by many Canadian politicians and industry leaders to be Canada's economic gateway to the Pacific, if not the world. Overseen by the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority, the port's presence in Canada's national life is made more salient by a combination of political and cultural factors, including the country's longstanding promotion of global trade, and the historic commercial, political, and cultural linkages between Metropolitan Vancouver and British Columbia with the Asia-Pacific region.

The port connects Canada's trade-dependent economy to over 170 countries globally (Wilson, 2023). It also handles roughly one-third of Canada's trade outside of North America (Port of Vancouver, 2023). This significant movement of products and resources is reflected in the port's annual measurement of movement of goods. In 2022, the port handled over 140 million metric tons.

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Google Earth image of the Roberts Bank Terminal and development area showing the proximity to the Canadian/United States border. Accessed September 2023.

While this reflected a downturn from 2021, when the port moved 146 million metric tons, it still represents a long-term growth pattern.

While the government, the port authority, and media stories have used the word “expansion” to highlight this latest phase of port facilities construction, the project entails the building of a new terminal and site. Eventually, the new three-berth terminal would increase the terminal’s capacity by two-thirds as measured by the twenty-foot equivalent (TEU) metric which is used for the container shipping industry. Total capacity from the combined terminals would increase from 900,000 to 1.5 million TEU. As a point of reference, the world’s largest container ships can handle over 18,000 TEU per trip.

Vancouver’s Port and the North American Economy

As measured by cargo tonnage, the Port of Vancouver often ranks among the ten largest ports in North America. Notably, it is the largest port complex in Canada by a significant margin, and, according to the port authority, is roughly the same size as the next five largest Canadian ports combined. Part of the port’s

story for the global business community has been its focus on diversification. The port handles a range of cargo and related activities, including bulk, containers, breakbulk, liquid bulk, automobiles, and cruise ships. Much of this activity and growth can be attributed to Vancouver’s enviable geographic position as Canada’s Pacific entry point, and critical trade linkages with buoyant economies of trading partners in the Asia Pacific region. Of the 141 million metric tons of goods moved through the Vancouver port complex in 2022, over 25 percent of this exchange was with China, and roughly another quarter was with Japan and South Korea.

This trading activity is a long-term reflection of the government of Canada’s Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor Initiative, which was launched in 2006 with the goal of enhancing the capacity and efficiency of Canada’s transportation assets, including ports, roads, and rail connections across Western Canada. In conjunction with investments made at the Port of Prince Rupert, the economic dividends for Canada and British Columbia have been on the rise. According to Transport Canada, the country’s share of total North American West Coast container traffic enjoyed a steady increase between 2006 and 2017.

Implications for the Borderlands and the Salish Sea

The port's relationship with the Salish Sea region is significant. Its interests sprawl across 16 British Columbia municipalities and also overlap with the traditional territories of Coast Salish First Nations. The port authority has control of more than 16,000 hectares of water, 1,000 hectares of land, and over 215 miles of shoreline (Port of Vancouver, 2019). This combination of water and land extends from Burrard Inlet in the north and south to the Fraser River and Roberts Bank.

The Port of Vancouver's well-established linkages with the Asia Pacific region often overshadow the port's significant role in facilitating trade between Canada and the United States. The port moves over 4 million metric tons of goods between the two countries. However, it is the export of coal at the port's Westshore Terminals that has captured significant public attention and generated controversy. Coal from mines in Western Canada and the United States is currently the port's largest export and contributes to economic activity in British Columbia pegged at over \$5 billion. The port has benefitted in particular from shipments from Wyoming and Montana that were previously shipped through Oregon and Washington ports. However, the closure of coal export facilities in those states due to environmental concerns has led to subsequent diversion through Canada's West Coast (Hopper, 2023).

The port's formal linkages with U.S. exporters underscores its strategic location for multiple countries and jurisdictions. The Port of Vancouver's marine locations along the Strait of Georgia and Burrard Inlet situate operations squarely within Western Canada's largest metropolitan region of Vancouver, but also put them proximate to multiple Tribal and First Nations jurisdictions in British Columbia and Washington State. Notably, the Roberts Bank terminal is less than one mile from the United States border and in addition to Metro Vancouver is within short distances to Vancouver Island, British Columbia's Gulf

Islands, and the San Juan Islands of Washington State. It is also within a short distance to multiple coastal communities in the transboundary region, including Tsawwassen and Ladner on the British Columbia side of the international border, and the communities of Blaine and Point Roberts on the Washington State side.

Formal and Informal Oppositions in the Salish Sea and Beyond

The port authority has regularly referred to the environmental concerns in its public-facing media and communication. In 2014, the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority embarked upon an environmental impact statement in consultation with local governments, tribal communities, regulators, and other public constituents. The port concluded that "after the implementation of mitigation and offsetting, the project is not expected to result in any significant adverse environmental effects" and that "potential adverse effects can be fully or partially avoided or reduced through project design and the implementation of environmental management plans" (Port of Vancouver, 2018, para. P.31).

Jonathan Wilkinson, Canada's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, said that the decision to approve RBT2 was based on "the clear and compelling need for expanded container capacity on the West Coast, the robust mitigation measures that will be required of the project and that address key areas of environmental concern, and the support of the project from a number of First Nations." According to Wilkinson, "When we engage in good faith and let ourselves be guided by science, we can grow the economy in a way which advances reconciliation and protects the planet."

However, Wilkinson's sentiment was undermined by British Columbia's Environmental Assessment Office, which argued in a May 2023 report that RBT2 "would result in numerous adverse residual environmental, economic, social, cultural and health effects, and cumulative effects." In the context of the project, the B.C. agency defines residual as "an environmental effect of a

project that remains, or is predicted to remain, after mitigation measures have been implemented” (Government of British Columbia: Environmental Assessment Office, 2023, p. 20).

The federal government’s position has also been countered by a number of formal and informal voices through media channels in Canada and the United States, but also regulatory agencies within Canada. For example, Canada’s federal Minister of Environment and Climate Change cited impacts on local communities such as noise and light pollution, as well as cultural and economic impacts to Indigenous communities. Also cited were a lack of sufficient offsetting of habitat to justify the loss of 177 hectares to construction, and adverse impacts on orcas and salmon (Federal Review Panel Report, 2020).

Even as the port authority awaited a final decision previous to 2023, it committed to a lessening of impacts on marine habitat and wildlife, including juvenile salmon, and a follow-up program to monitor marine shipping impacts for orca populations (Saunders, 2022).

However, concerns over the viability of orcas and Chinook salmon populations have prompted a legal challenge of the port expansion by an environmental alliance consisting of the David Suzuki Foundation, Georgia Strait Alliance, Raincoast Conservation Foundation, and Wilderness Committee. The organizations, represented by Ecojustice, contend that approval of the project is unlawful on the grounds that it runs contrary to the Canada’s Species at Risk Act.

In a May 23 press release, the alliance pointed to concurrent crises of biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change, along with immediate impacts to the Salish Sea’s orca population that make the coastal waters off of British Columbia and Washington state home. “Decisions like these are putting immense pressure on the 73 Southern Resident orcas left in the wild and increasing their chances of extinction,” said Lucero González Ruiz of Georgia Strait Alliance.

Similarly, Tribal and First Nations’ perspectives have sometimes differed significantly from the



Tahlequah, a female Southern Resident killer whale, is backdropped by the coal terminal at Roberts Bank

government view. For example, in a letter to the Canadian and B.C. environment ministries, Grand Chief of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, Stewart Phillip, noted that while federal and provincial governments had completed some consultation with First Nations, they had failed to gain informed consent of all impacted tribal jurisdictions, including the Lummi Nation, whose fishing grounds extend right up to the Canadian border. Phillip also pointed to the disconnect between government sanctioning of RBT2 and Canada’s adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Phillip, 2023).

In the Media: Informational Flows and Attitudinal Shifts

Since the port authority proposed the enlargement of the Roberts Bank facility, news media have provided coverage, analysis, and discussion across multiple platforms. The media’s role has been one of information dissemination and news about the proposal’s ongoing developments. For example, highly read publications like the Vancouver Sun and CBC News have provided British Columbians with regulatory updates and environmental hurdles. News articles from government and corporate media have primarily dwelled on the economic and infrastructural implications of the project, although a growing focus has been on environmental impacts.

Moving Forward: Re-investing in Journalism and Reconnecting Citizens

As with other policy issues, the news media play an influential role in shaping attitudes and beliefs about political and regulatory activity related to RBT2. The political messages emanating from news media influences not only what public audiences think about, but how they will evaluate issues of public policy and politics (Entman, 1989). This shaping of public attitudes has ramifications for substantial projects like Roberts Bank. For example, a number of stories from British Columbia media have positioned the port expansion as an economic necessity for Canada, while other stories in Canada, the U.S., and internationally, have challenged the expansion on the grounds that it will harm the regional Salish Sea ecosystem and have a detrimental impact on tribal interests.

While articles and stories about the port expansion are written by professional journalists, their construction relies on a much larger information ecosystem of government communication specialists, industry leaders, environmental advocates, and community organizations. The inclusion (or lack thereof) of these voices will often determine what stories are told, whose perspectives are heard, and how issues of economy and ecology are positioned for the public and policymakers. Thus, the media coverage of RBT2 in local, national, and global media will help determine the public's broader position on this large undertaking, which will inform subsequent political debates.

The complexity of the port's expansion, particularly as it relates to the long-term governance and oversight of the Salish Sea watershed and its marine ecosystem, will require special journalistic treatment that pays attention not only to ingrained news values such as proximity, timeliness, and conflict, but also to the human and ecological impact dimensions that might require additional resources. An example of this approach comes from the New York Times, where a first-person essay, authored by E. Tammy Winter with photographs by Damon Winter and outside funding from the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, applied Indigenous cultural frameworks and perspectives to economic and scientific debates.

The Roberts Bank Terminal 2 expansion represents a complex and challenging development for regional and local stakeholders as well as Tribes and First Nations in the Salish Sea basin. Its transboundary location, straddling the borders of multiple jurisdictions, means that the expansion story runs the risk of being framed thematically for short-term considerations while overlooking holistic, long-term impacts. For example, while some media have championed the economic and trade impacts for Western Canada, they have provided less coverage of the biodiversity challenges its construction would present to the Salish Sea as a whole.

A related challenge is that, though it is located within one mile of the U.S. border, the infrastructure itself would sit in Canada and accrue economic benefits to Canada, even as the larger transboundary region deals with adverse effects in the long term. To date, the expansion story has warranted a higher quantity of coverage on the Canadian side of the international border. While some U.S. and international media have provided a focus on sustainability, ecosystem, or impacts to Indigenous peoples, these stories have not received the kind of sustained attention that would keep the port development in the public eye. With the exception of regional, community, and tribal media in the U.S., RBT2 is primarily understood by the media as a "Canadian" story versus a truly transboundary one.

To date, the Canadian public has been relatively well served by the frequency of national and regional stories focusing on themes of economic and environmental impacts. However, given its location in an international marine setting and the ecological/environmental implications for communities in the U.S., the port expansion story has warranted far less attention south of the border. While the project has warranted coverage in regional publications such as the Salish Current, Cascadia Daily News, and

Bellingham Herald, as well as metropolitan media such as the Seattle Times, national media coverage has lagged behind the coverage north of the border. Increased attention from U.S. national media outlets will help foster greater awareness from citizens from across jurisdictions and ensure that communities on both sides of the international border have a voice related to the terminal's future. Previous economic projects in the Salish Sea region with significant ecological ramifications have also catalyzed extensive cross-border dialogue and advocacy (see Moscato 2023, which offers a successful model for cross-border ecological advocacies). Given the scale of Roberts Bank's next phase and its environmental impacts, the project deserves similar deliberation from Canadian, U.S., and Tribal governments.

From a journalism perspective, a long-term challenge remains the structure of news media industries and organizations. The comparatively diminutive scale of coverage of RBT2 in the United States has created a news shadow dynamic, within which media flows about a prominent civic or economic development are stifled by the national or geographic/jurisdictional nature of news media industries. Given the economic-ecological magnitude of this next phase of port expansion, this comes as something of a surprise. However, this gap in transboundary-focused coverage can be overcome by a combination of metropolitan media in the Salish Sea region along with national coverage and stories from local, regional, environmental, and tribal media enterprises. This sounds like a tall order, but the surplus of environmental journalism expertise in the cross-border Salish Sea and Cascadia regions makes this an achievable goal.

Like other large-scale industrial projects with political and environmental ramifications, RBT2 reminds citizens of the importance of investing in newsrooms, particularly environmental beats; and of reconnecting community and tribal issues to national policy coverage on both sides of the U.S./Canada border. It also serves as a reminder for the media industry that sustained coverage of "mega-projects" such as Roberts Bank requires going beyond traditional news pegs, government announcements, and

organizational spokespersons in order to better represent the multiplicity of stakeholders who are bound to be impacted.

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EMERGING ISSUES IN THE SALISH SEA

This series aims to highlight emerging issues and recent science and scholarship about the shared waters of the Salish Sea. This series presents information about transboundary issues in a free and accessible format for policymakers, students and members of the public.

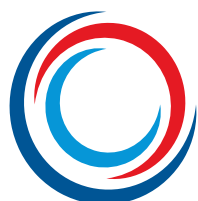


Salish Sea from space, NASA 2021

Moscato, Derek (2023). Supply Chain Narratives in the Salish Sea's Transboundary Ecosystem: News Media and Public Positioning of the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 Expansion. Salish Sea Institute, Western Washington University.

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