

Big questions for Milwaukee's harbor

by Eric Hansen

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Picture Milwaukee's harbor — and a flow of heavy trucks hauling High Hazard Flammable (HHF) ethanol into the port for export by tanker barges to Quebec and the world market.

Then imagine long trains of tar sands crude oil tank cars arriving, also for export on tanker barges.

Finally, think of a tire pyrolysis operation incinerating old tires to turn them into fuel oil.

Is this the future we want for our harbor, lakefront, rivers and the Great Lakes?

None of these three industrial scenarios — the ethanol, crude oil and tires — are theoretical.

U.S. Venture, a subsidiary of Appleton-based U.S. Oil, secured a long-term lease from the Port of Milwaukee in 2014 — a lease that amounts to a blank check for developing petroleum-related industrial projects.

Ethanol shipping plans are currently moving forward, including construction of a pipeline from the port's tank facility to the liquid cargo pier.

Tar sands crude oil plans appear to be dormant for the moment — but a marketing push for the project only ended when the price of oil dropped. The drop in price may not last.

That tire operation? Language specifically authorizing it is in the lease.

Question: has there been an independent safety review and the broad public discussion that the significant impacts of the oil company lease so obviously call for?

Dear city officials: What is your remedy for this situation?

Milwaukee already faces considerable risk from flammable crude oil and ethanol trains endangering neighborhoods and waters.

Why allow an oil company to create a hub for these dangerous cargos?

Don't these plans threaten decades of clean water work, community health and safety, and the reputation of our city?

Isn't Milwaukee a water city? A climate progress city?

Don't these plans also risk the considerable public resources put into our lakefront, river walk and other infrastructure?

Ethanol fires are notably dangerous. For example, a 2009 train accident near Rockford, Ill., triggered a ferocious ethanol fire that led to significant human casualties among motorists stopped at a railroad crossing: one death and three life-threatening burn injuries.

That 2009 incident also led to a historic, 50-mile long fish kill in the Rock River. Ethanol deoxygenates water when spilled.

What would protect our waters, and the world record brown trout that Milwaukee's harbor produces, if there were an ethanol spill here? Ethanol is water soluble and difficult to recover when spilled.

U.S. Venture plans to bring ethanol to the port by truck. What route would those trucks take to get to the port? Has there been an assessment of the road damage that is possible with those heavy loads?

It is also important to assess the sheer scale of the oil company's long term plans for the port facility.

Canadian Sailings magazine, a shipping industry trade journal, describes the tar sands crude oil plans in its March 16, 2015 issue: "Jones Island would receive crude via rail in volumes ranging from 5,000 to 60,000 barrels per day."

Tar sands oil sinks in water, making cleanup of spills notoriously difficult. A 2010 spill in Michigan's Kalamazoo River cost \$1.2 billion to clean up.

If the ethanol pipeline is built in the port, wouldn't the infrastructure be in place that could facilitate a rapid return to plans for crude oil shipping?

Now is the time to speak up for clean water, common sense and business operations in the Port of Milwaukee that reflect our community's values. For more information see saferails.org/mkeharbor

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<http://www.jsonline.com/story/opinion/contributors/2017/07/28/hansen-big-questions-milwaukees-harbor/520037001/>