

Cautious welcome for new Cumbrian coal mine

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Planning consent for a new mine in Cumbria has been cautiously welcomed by the [Heritage Railway Association](#).

The heritage rail sector is a small but responsible user of very small quantities of the highest quality, lowest emissions, coal. Despite concerted efforts to find other options to fuel global heritage icons like Flying Scotsman, no alternative is yet available.

The long-awaited approval of the Woodhouse mine in Cumbria is the latest example of a growing understanding that a number of key UK sectors still have no viable alternative to coal. Creating circumstances where coal has to be imported, from as far away as Columbia and Australia, hugely increases overall emissions and is strong example of offshoring pollution. Shipping coal to the UK produces up to five times more CO₂ emissions than using domestically mined coal.

Heritage Railway Association Chief Executive, Steve Oates, said: "This decision does give some cautious optimism for heritage rail, although it's probably too early to say what the direct impact of approval for the mine in West Cumbria will be for our steam railways.

"The mine is still some years away from production and current plans include a large proportion of the coal being exported. Tests will need to take place with the finished product before anyone can give a definitive

answer about its use as a steam locomotive fuel, but there is nothing intrinsic about coking coal that would make it unsuitable.

“What is undoubtedly positive is that the approval represents real evidence that a more mature narrative about coal is finally coming to the fore. A number of sectors that are very important to the UK economy – including heritage rail – still have no real alternative to coal. While everyone is committed to exploring alternatives, ending coal extraction in this country before those alternatives are tested and proven is essentially an exercise in increasing and offshoring overall emissions.”

Heritage rail contributes more than £600m to the UK economy each year, directly employs 4,000 people and supports more than 22,000 volunteers. HRA members provide the cornerstone visitor attraction in towns as diverse as Bridgnorth, Porthmadog and Swanage, generating more than 13m visits a year.

Steam locomotives use high-quality, low pollution coal that produces very little smoke. Steam coal produces large amounts of energy and high temperatures that can be harnessed by a locomotive. Most of what comes out of a steam locomotive chimney is steam – harmless water vapour.

In the region of eight million tonnes of coal is still used every year in the UK by industries like steel, cement and power generation. That is in addition to the current increase in coal use to cover the resurgent demand for power generation as a result of the war in Ukraine.

Some of the highest quality, lowest polluting steam coal in the world can be found right underneath our feet in the UK. Other countries do not have access to such high-quality resources and burn lower grade coals, like lignite, for energy production that create far greater emissions and are considered to be polluters of global concern.

“The HRA is committed to securing a long-term solution to locomotive fuel that will keep international icons like Flying Scotsman in steam for the public to enjoy for decades to come. It’s unlikely that the answer will come in the form of a single golden bullet, so each step like this new mine in Cumbria is a vital step along the road.” Mr Oates added.

“In the interim, we’re obviously encouraged that the Ffos-y-fran mine in South Wales is still producing lump coal for heritage railways and that they intend to seek consent for an extension to the existing mining operation. Additionally, the HRA continues to actively support the research and development work being undertaken by Carbon Products Limited to produce new low emission coal and biocoal products for heritage steam use.”