

Heritage Railway Association supports last-minute bid to save UK domestic coal

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The government is days away from deciding whether or not a new UK coal mine should open. A refusal will mean heritage steam in the UK, as well as the country's steel and cement industries, is entirely dependent on imported coal. Many heritage railways may have to cease operation.

Banks Mining, the company behind the new mine proposal, says that government indecision over UK coal mining is the result of a drive to reduce greenhouse gases emissions. But importing the five million tonnes a year the country needs, from Russia and the USA, generates many times the CO2 emissions than the transport of domestically produced coal. Every tonne of coal imported from Russia creates five to six times more CO2 than transporting it from the North East of England to a UK customer.

The proposed new mine, at Highthorn in Northumberland, will be the UK's biggest, producing 3 million tonnes a year over the next three to five years. That's more than half needed for the coal and steel industries, around 100th of the coal produced by the UK a hundred years ago.

The heritage steam industry is particularly concerned by the potential loss of UK-produced coal.

Steve Oates, CEO of the Heritage Railway Association, said: "The imported coal needed for steel and cement production is completely unsuitable for steam engines.

"Steam power needs lump coal, which will continue to be available if the government allows the new mine to go ahead.

"Should the government decide against the proposal, UK steam coal supplies will dwindle and vanish. England's last mine producing coal used for heritage rail will cease production in May.

"Heritage railways will have to source the kind of coal it needs from overseas, at increased environmental cost, potentially at prices many railways will simply not be able to afford."

The heritage rail sector uses 26,000 tonnes of coal a year, producing 0.02% of the UK's CO2 emissions.

Mr Oates said: "Heritage railways take a very responsible approach to environmental issues. Every possible measure is taken to reduce burn, establish environmental policies, and implement measures to mitigate impacts."

"The Heritage Railway Association continues to lobby Westminster for support, and has been reassured that the government has no desire to see the end of heritage steam. 'We support the coal industry in seeking new permissions to mine in the UK. It makes no sense to create huge increases in greenhouse gas emissions by importing coal, and major increases in cost.'"

The HRA is calling on all its members to support continued supply of UK coal by writing to Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government; Nigel Huddleston, MP, Under Secretary of State for Sport, Tourism and Heritage, and to their own members of Parliament.

Photo credit: Heritage Railway Association