

Mine decision 'short-sighted' says heritage rail group

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The planning decision to stop mining at Ffos-Y-Fran in South Wales will almost certainly increase pollution as sectors that still have no viable alternative to coal are forced into imports from thousands of miles away according to the Heritage Railway Association (HRA).

Ffos-Y-Fran is the only UK mine producing the high-quality, low emission 'steam coal' that a number of British industries depend upon – including around 150 heritage railways throughout the country. While almost all electricity generation in the UK now comes from other sources, manufacture of everything from steel to cosmetics still requires coal.

The move to cease mining at Ffos-Y-Fran comes at a time when global shipping routes are still disrupted by the war in Ukraine, leading to further volatility in the availability of high-quality coal. The HRA is aware of British coal users being forced to import from as far afield as Columbia, with all of the increased emissions involved in ship transport over thousands of miles.

The decision also poses a renewed threat to the continued existence of Britain's world leading heritage rail sector which keeps icons like *Flying Scotsman* on the rails. Heritage railways are a key part of UK cultural heritage, drawing visitors from across the globe and generating more than £600m for the economy each year, while directly supporting around 4,000 jobs. Heritage railways are already battling the cost pressures common in the visitor economy, but the cumulative impact of this blow could yet prove too much for some in the almost exclusively not-for-profit sector.

Heritage Railway Association Chief Executive, Steve Oates, said: "On the face of it, I'm sure many people do believe that ending coal mining at Ffos-Y-Fran is good for the environment. But the reality is that overall emissions are almost certainly going to increase as a result of the closure.

"There's still a belief in this country that coal is inextricably linked to power stations. That's not the case anymore. Coal in the UK is chiefly used by a relatively small but important number of sectors and the volumes involved are pretty small – but the impact of having to import from thousands of miles away is huge. Most of those sectors still do not have a viable alternative to coal that they can turn to right now – no matter how much research might be going into an eventual solution.

"We think that this is a very short-sighted decision, which is likely to have dire longer-term consequences. We await a decision from the mine owners as to whether they will appeal or take the issue to the Welsh Government"

Aside from the environmental concerns about importing coal over huge distances, there are also concerns about supply security. When the Ffos-Y-Fran mine was temporarily closed by an equipment failure around 18-months ago, heritage railways were forced to drastically reduce their services and the HRA understands that other sectors faced similar challenges.

The whole of Britain's heritage railways use around 30,000 tonnes of coal a year, equivalent to what a single coal fired power station would have used in a week. Alternative fuels for heritage steam locomotives are being researched and developed, but at present none can completely replace the need for coal.

The Heritage Railway Association has actively engaged with a number of stakeholders in an effort to help get across the importance of good quality, low emission steam coal like that mined at Ffos-Y-Fran to the future of heritage rail and broaden understanding of the issues. It has also visited the mine and has met with local politicians to discuss the situation on a number of occasions.

"We know that many in the Welsh Government understand just how pivotal supply of coal is to the heritage rail sector." Added Mr Oates. "Wales was the birthplace of railway preservation and has an unparalleled heritage rail visitor offer that helps people the world over appreciate stunning scenery without dependency upon the private car. The same is true in places like Pickering, Swanage and Bridgnorth too.

"I hope that the strategic value of this mine will mean the bigger picture can be properly considered before it's too late."

Photo credit: Heritage Railway Association