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Writers weigh in against oilsands route

Mythos of Montana trout streams invoked against plan to truck oversized loads to Alberta

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In this region famous for both its angling and its authors, Annick Smith has a long history with the Blackfoot River.

She and her family erected their home, a hand-hewn log cabin, along one of its tributaries, Bear Creek, in 1971, which she wrote about in her memoir, *Hornstead*.

In the 1980s, she and her companion, William Kittredge, collaborated with Norman Maclean to turn his book *A River Runs Through It* into a film script, which became the movie directed by Robert Redford.

Now she feels that her wild corner of the world is under attack.

"I'm doing the only thing I can do, other than laying down in the road to stop it, and that is writing," said Smith, who has joined the growing buzz-saw of opposition to the efforts by Imperial Oil, a Canadian subsidiary of ExxonMobil, to move its oversized oil-processing equipment from a port in Idaho to Canada along a path that includes some of the United States' most scenic highways.

Smith's home is near Highway 200, the only major artery in the rural valley near Missoula. If an environmental study finds that the megaloads would have little impact, then 207 modules — each three-stories tall, 7.3 metres wide and nearly as long as a football field — would rumble by cattle ranches and along the Blackfoot, one of the West's best-known trout streams.

The facility in Alberta that the modules will be part of is an \$8-billion project that will process oil from the oilsands. The equipment is made in Korea and shipped to Lewiston, Idaho. The easiest route from there to Alberta is over 2,100 kilometres through Idaho and into Montana, crossing the wild, forested spine of the Rockies on serpentine two-lane roads. The alternative, the company says, is to ship through the Panama Canal and up the Mississippi.

Smith and other writers are bringing their literary weight to fight the project, using the mythos of America's wildest trout streams, especially the Blackfoot River, the setting for Maclean's novel.

David James Duncan and Rick Bass, acclaimed writers on the wilderness and rivers, live near Missoula and have each set aside a novel to work together on a cri de coeur modelled, they say, after the 1941 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans. Proceeds from their book, called *Heart of the Monster* after a Nez Perce Indian story, will go to All Against the Haul, an advocacy group.

"The tar sands are the biggest generator of climate change on the planet," Bass said about his opposition to the loads.

The equipment to be transported, which dwarfs regular semi-loads, is wider than the two-lane roads on which it will be hauled. It requires large pullouts, where vehicles can park when they are idle, as well as the movement of power lines and times when both lanes will be blocked.



SUPPLIED FILE
The film *A River Runs Through It* evokes naturalists' reverence for Montana's Blackfoot River.

Two other companies have also said they want to move oversized equipment along the same route, and there could be many more.

Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer supports the route and says its opponents are overreacting. "Chlorine, insecticides and fertilizers go down these roads in trucks every day," he said. "If they spill, they would kill fish for 50 to 100 miles."

But the large loads, he said, "are inert, like big shoe boxes made of steel. If one fell in the river, they could be cut in half or taken out whole." Until they were removed, he argued, "fish could spawn under them."

Still, mountain rivers are reverently held, and the waters here are cathedrals for fly fishermen.

"The loads will defile the Blackfoot," Smith said. The road through the Blackfoot Valley "will be a road to the worst, instead of a sacred highway through what is beautiful and natural."

Opponents say the loads will change the wild character of the rivers, as floaters fish and watch giant machinery go by.

But Schweitzer argues the roads are a federally financed transportation corridor. "Montana can't up and change the rules because we don't like somebody," he said of the efforts by opponents to stop the loads.

Many residents worry that the loads will block emergency vehicles, but the governor said helicopters could provide transport.

The shipping companies seem assured they will get the needed permits for the 12-month haul. Dozens of modules have already been shipped to Idaho, pullouts have been built and trees along highways have been cut back to allow passage.

Invoking the name of one of the world's most famous trout streams to fight development has been used before — with success. In the 1990s, a company proposed building a mine that uses cyanide to extract gold near Lincoln, Mont. Eventually a voter initiative banned the mining.

"We never would have won if it hadn't been for Norman Maclean's novel and Robert Redford's movie," Bass said.