Idaho's megaload saga yields a positive twist

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

As a general rule, globalization allows a rich, powerful corporation to maximize profits by exploiting cheap labor overseas and cheap transportation at home.

That's how North America exports jobs overseas and imports manufactured goods.

Case in point: Exxon-Mobil's designs for U.S. Highway 12. Almost five years ago, Exxon-Mobil, which owns Imperial Oil, embarked on a plan to purchase pre-farbricated equipment from South Korea, ship it to the Port of Lewiston and then transport this machinery on more than 200 of the largest, rolling roadblocks the region had ever seen along U.S. 12 toward the Kearl oil sands of Alberta.

Whatever gave Imperial the idea this might not work?

Not Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. He literally was gushing with support.

Not the congressional delegation, which also signed on.

Ditto for the Port of Lewiston and the Idaho Transportation Department.

Eventually, Exxon-Mobil found the process of running these rolling roadblocks collided with topography and climate. But a corporation with Exxon-Mobil's resources presumably could engineer solutions given enough time.

What it didn't count on was local activists such as Linwood Laughy and his wife, Borg Hendrickson, launching a resistance campaign that would stretch from local meetings into administrative hearings, the state courts and ultimately into the federal courtroom.

In time, they would be allied with environmentalists and members of the Nez Perce Indian Tribe.

Joined by counterparts across the border in Montana, they stymied the Imperial shipments. As a test shipment sat idle at the Montana border, Imperial began chopping up loads in Lewiston - at considerable expense - in order to move them along U.S. Highway 95 and then along Interstate 90 toward Canada.

But the company was losing the one resource it valued most of all - time.

By February of 2013, reports Michael Ames in the New Yorker, "the company was 61 percent over budget for the first phase of its oil-sands development."

Sometime earlier, the Toronto Globe and Mail reported Kearl's price tag had jumped to $12.9 billion - up from an original estimate of $8 billion.

"From now on," Ames reported, "Imperial is ordering its heavy processing equipment from Canadian manufacturers."

Imperial spokesman Pius Rolheiser told Ames that problems moving equipment along U.S. 12 "was a significant factor in our decision not to procure modules from outside Alberta."

Leaving aside the not inconsiderable questions about the tar sands' environmental impact, this at least removes a threat to a sensitive river corridor and it generates something this continent has not seen often enough - manufacturing jobs close to home for a change. How can you argue with that?

The scope of Imperial's plan seemed ill-suited to the U.S. 12. But even smaller shipments ran into trouble. Conoco-Phillips' plan to send four loads eastward got snarled by topography and climate.

By the time General Electric's subsidiary, Resources Conservation Company International, attempted to move eight water purifiers and evaporators to Alberta last year, it ran into a new roadblock. Citing the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill sealed shut the corridor. RCCI wound up using an alternative route from Oregon through southern Idaho and then into Montana.

To readers of Ames' story who are discovering the megaload saga for the first time, this may not spell the end of globalization. Can we at least hope it suggests that there are limits? - M.T.