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Pollution permit for coal-fired plant threatens air, public health

Officials should consider clean energy as an affordable, reliable solution

LEXINGTON, Ky. – The state’s release of a draft air pollution permit for a proposed coal-burning power plant in Kentucky poses serious threats to air quality, drinking water supplies and public health, said a coalition of rural electric cooperative ratepayers and environmental and health groups.

The good news, the groups said, is that there still is an opportunity to invest in cleaner solutions to the proposed 278-megawatt Smith plant before the Kentucky Division of Air Quality makes the permit final and allows East Kentucky Power Cooperative to proceed with the \$766 million project.

“Medical research shows clearly that air pollution from coal-fired electrical generation plants like Smith causes human diseases and death,” said Philip Curd, MD, a Jackson County physician and member of the Jackson Energy Co-op. “We could prevent a lot of disease and death by building less coal-fired plants and putting more resources into renewable energy and energy conservation.”

Instead of allowing EKPC to saddle its customers with nearly \$1 billion in debt to build a plant that’s not even needed, Curd and others in the coalition said state officials have a duty to protect the health of Kentuckians and their air and water by denying the final permit in light of cleaner electricity options.

“I need my co-op to provide electricity to my family and my community, but I want them to do it in a way that won’t make children’s health worse,” said Janet Futrell, teacher and Bluegrass Energy member. “We’ve already got poor air quality from power plant pollution, and the coal burned at the Smith plant will only make matters worse.”

Coal plant emissions include fine particulate matter – or soot – which is linked to respiratory problems like asthma and pulmonary disease, as well as heart problems, and is unsafe at any level. Coal plants also are a major source of mercury, a highly toxic metal that can result in developmental disorders and chronic disease and is especially harmful to children. The Smith plant’s mercury emissions would settle out and accumulate in rivers, lakes and streams in Kentucky and into the food chain through fish.

Other pollutants that will come out of the Smith plant's smokestacks include sulfur dioxide, which causes acid rain; nitrogen oxides, which lead to asthma-causing smog formation; and carbon dioxide, which the EPA announced last month is a danger to human health because of its climate change impacts.

Coal prices have risen steadily in the past several years, and EKPC members have been subjected to frequent rate increases. In November the Licking Valley Co-op got permission from the Public Service Commission to raise its per kilowatt hour rate to nearly 10 cents. Carbon control legislation, necessary for curbing harmful greenhouse gas emissions, would raise the costs of dirty energy even higher.

"There are also huge public health costs associated with burning coal," said Vicki Holmberg, a Lexington physician. Holmberg pointed to an October 2009 report by the National Academy of Sciences estimating that pollution from coal-burning power plants costs the nation roughly \$62 billion every year in health care costs. "Kentucky should be moving toward energy solutions that will avoid the health and economic problems that are resulting in the cancellation of permits for new coal plants all over the country." Nationwide, in 2009, 26 proposals for coal plants were abandoned or rejected, mainly because the plants were too expensive.

By contrast, expert analyses conducted in Kentucky over the last several years have documented the financial, economic and environmental benefits of energy solutions such as weatherization, solar hot water, hydro and wind power. These reports consistently found that such programs help utility members save energy and money.

"Weatherization projects don't require air permits, and renewable energy sources like solar, wind and hydro don't release air pollution that can kill people like coal soot does," said Miranda Brown of Winchester, who is concerned with the impacts of the Smith plant on her community. "Efficiency and renewable energy programs are just as affordable and reliable as coal. They can help ratepayers save money, and they create more jobs than a single coal-burning plant. I urge Kentucky regulators to look closely at the facts and choose clean energy solutions instead of the Smith plant."

The Kentucky DAQ has scheduled a public hearing for the permit on February 4th at 6:30 PM at the Clark County Cooperative Extension Office, to which all members of the public can attend to give oral comments. Written comments can be submitted to the Kentucky DAQ within 30 days by email at James.Morse@ky.gov with a copy to the US EPA at Worley.Gregg@epamail.epa.gov.

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Background information on the Smith power plant and the energy efficiency/renewable energy options can be found at <http://www.kftc.org/stop-smith>, <http://www.kyenvironmentalfoundation.org>, and <http://www.sierraclub.org/coal/ky/>.

