

New Coalition Opposes More Michigan Coal Plants

Public Input Crucial in Anti-Coal Campaign

By Ted Sylvester

Citing coal's significant contribution to climate change and its deleterious effects on human health, the Ecology Center and its allies are asking Michigan residents to join them in a campaign to derail industry plans to build new coal-fired power plants in the state.

A statewide coalition of environmental and community organizations have launched the Clean Energy Now Campaign in an effort to push back at the coal industry and utilities as they try to move their coal-fired power-plant projects through the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's air and water quality permitting process.

With Michigan losing population along with its industrial base, Clean Energy Now organizers say that environmental concerns, regulatory uncertainties, and rising construction costs make this the wrong time for Michigan to invest in coal, a dirty 19th-century energy technology. Instead, they say, the state should turn its focus to retooling for a cleaner energy future that embraces inherently greener and more sustainable technologies, such as energy efficiency and renewable power (wind, solar, geothermal, etc.).

The Big Picture

Imagine a train loaded with coal long enough to wrap around the earth four times. That's how much coal the U.S. uses annually to generate about one-half its electricity from 500 or so existing power plants. That's also how much coal it takes to be the nation's single greatest source of climate-changing carbon dioxide (CO₂), about the same as all of our cars, trucks, buses, planes, and boats combined.

Burning coal releases more than 100 pollutants into the atmosphere. It is the largest source of sulfur dioxide emissions (which cause acid rain); the largest source of fine soot particles (which lodge deeply into the lungs and contribute to thousands of premature deaths from heart and lung disease yearly); and the second largest source of nitrogen oxides (which contribute to smog and asthma attacks).

Further, coal plants are also the largest remaining source of human-generated mercury (which contaminates lakes and streams, the fish that live in them, and anyone who eats those fish). And finally, coal combustion results in more than 120 million tons of fly ash, bottom ash, boiler slag, and sludge from air pollution controls annually—roughly the same amount as all municipal solid waste disposed in U.S. landfills each year.

The Myth of Clean Coal

Coal is a sedimentary organic rock with a concentration of carbon between 40 and 90 percent by weight, making it the most carbon-intensive fuel. The term "clean coal" has evolved over the years into an umbrella term used in the promotion of coal as an energy source. Before 2000, "clean coal technology" referred to measures taken to lower emissions of particulates, nitrogen oxides, and sulfur dioxides mandated by the Clean Air Act Extension of 1970, and the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977 and 1990. These measures included low-sulfur coal, scrubbers, electrostatic precipitators, coal cleaning techniques, and development of higher efficiency combustion techniques.

With rising concern over global warming and the emergence of "advanced clean coal technology," "clean coal" now primarily refers to technology fixes aimed at "zero-emissions" or "near-zero-emissions" of climate-changing CO₂. One such measure, carbon-capture and storage (CCS) technology, would allow a plant to capture CO₂ before it is released and then store it underground. Sequestration technology, however, has yet to be proven commercially viable and may not be safe or successful.

Another measure, integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC) technology, is considered cleaner because it produces electricity by burning gas made from coal and has the potential to trap greenhouse gases and store them underground. Currently considered too expensive and unreliable, only two IGCC plants exist in the nation.

When it comes to greenhouse gas emissions, the most serious environmental threat facing the planet, there is currently no such thing as "clean" coal. Even the newest and most efficient coal plants produce more than two times the CO₂ of a new natural gas plant, and over 50 percent more than generating electricity with oil. Commercial-scale clean-coal power stations are, by all estimations, years away from reality. For this reason, and because retrofitting existing plants won't be easy or cheap once it is feasible, environmental organizers and climate change specialists favor investment in alternative energy technologies like wind and solar over increasing our dependence on coal.

Michigan's Energy Challenges

The rise of oil and natural gas prices and the comparative availability and relatively low cost of coal,

combined with allegedly greener technology, has allowed coal to attempt a comeback of sorts. After a couple of decades in which no new coal plants were built, and now facing the likelihood that Congress or individual states will soon regulate greenhouse gas emissions, the coal industry, utilities, and their legislative allies are rushing to build over 100 new coal plants nationwide.

New coal plants for Michigan are far from a done deal, say Clean Energy Now organizers. They point to DOE records that show the number of proposed coal plants peaked at 151 in May of last year, and a total of 60 proposals were cancelled or defeated in 27 states in 2007. Regulators rejected plants in Florida, Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Oregon.

But Michigan coal opponents face their own set of challenges. An energy plan ordered by Gov. Jennifer Granholm estimated that at least one new electrical generation power plant would be needed by 2015. Then there is the perception that coal is plentiful, cheap, and with the latest technology, "clean." Add to the mix the fact that Michigan has the highest unemployment in the nation, and industrial port cities like Rogers City, on the northeast coast of the Lower Peninsula where Wolverine Power Cooperative wants to build a 600 MW coal plant, are starved for the jobs new construction and plant operation brings.

The last new coal plant built in Michigan, a small one near Manistee, came online in 1990. There are currently five coal plant proposals before the MDEQ seeking approval for air pollution permits, with two others under discussion. The Clean Energy Now campaign seeks to block construction of new plants altogether, or at least delay them until carbon emissions are regulated by MDEQ.

While admitting that coal is plentiful (there is an estimated 100-year supply), Clean Energy Now organizers aim to convince state regulators that coal is not as attractive as it might appear; it is far from cheap when one considers the environmental, economic, and public health negatives of coal combustion. Already in Michigan, for example, power plant pollution is estimated to annually cause 871 deaths, 221 asthma-related emergency room visits, 18,500 asthma attacks, and 159,000 lost workdays.

Persuading state regulators to reject dirty coal is one thing. Clean energy advocates concurrently need to convince state policymakers that Michigan needs the kind of energy future envisioned by the New Apollo Program (see "Apollo Launches National Clean Energy & Green Jobs Program," pg. 3), an economic blueprint for investing in a new generation of green-collar jobs needed to build the necessary infrastructure of cleaner and more sustainable energy technology—wind towers and turbines, solar panels, a modern power grid, and next-generation cars.

Get Involved - Take Action

Climate change may be a global problem, but making a difference often comes down to fighting very local battles. The MDEQ has committed to enhanced public input opportunities, including hearings and comment periods for each proposed permit. Hearings for the Wolverine Power Cooperative's proposed air permit, for example, were held Oct. 29-30 in Rogers City, but public comments (letters, petitions, emails) will be accepted by the MDEQ through the end of the year. Visit cleanenergynowmi.org for more info about proposed coal plants for Holland, Essexville, Midland, and Lansing.

Everyone is strongly urged to become involved; public opinion can be a very powerful tool against Big Coal in the permit process. At this stage, the Clean Energy Now campaign has a special need for doctors, nurses, and other medical and health professionals who are interested in advocating for clean energy in the form of letters to the editor, op-eds, and testimony. Also needed are organizations and groups to sign resolutions favoring a moratorium on new plant construction. Please contact Monica Patel, Clean Energy Now Campaign Coordinator, by email at monica@ecocenter.org to get involved today.

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