

Coal-fired plant will be an environmental threat

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There might be a dangerous sentiment in the Lowcountry that what happens somewhere else in the state won't have a profound effect on our lives on the coast.

We'd be dead wrong.

A proposed coal-fired electricity plant in the Pee Dee is a perfect example. Last week, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, which holds the fate of the plant and our health in its hands, issued a draft air permit to build a Santee Cooper plant in Florence County. The draft permit opens the floor to public input on whether the state should allow the plant. A final permit could be issued as early as January. No public comment could mean an easier path for the plant to become an unhealthy reality.

The state-owned utility claims that the plant is needed to keep up with the energy demand resulting from breakneck growth in the state. The utility says the \$1 billion facility is expected to satisfy an 835-megawatt deficit that the company projects South Carolinians will face by 2015.

No one wants rolling blackouts, but a little conservation and better management practices are the keys to keeping the lights on and our health and environment unscathed.

Coal-fired plants are dinosaurs, besides being environmental nightmares. They produce more carbon dioxide than any other fuel per energy unit. The proposed 1,320-megawatt plant would spew into the atmosphere about 8.7 million tons of carbon dioxide every year. Coal is the most polluting energy source in the world, and burning it releases mercury, sulfur and nitrogen -- all byproducts that pose grave health problems for us and plants and animals.

So why build it? The ancient-technology plants appear to be cheap. The truth, however, is that as coal supplies dwindle, their costs increase. Also, new federal tariffs meant to squelch coal use are imminent. Those costs will be passed on to consumers.

But there will be even greater costs to our health and environment. Our coastal ecology is sensitive to any pollutants introduced into it. Already, fish in the state's coastal plain are contaminated by mercury that enter the rivers from the air, and the plant is expected to emit more than 300 pounds of mercury into the atmosphere every year. Without fish, the cycle of life for many coastal sea creatures -- plant and animal -- is compromised.

The byproduct of coal-burning is CO₂, a compound directly linked to global warming, rising sea levels and more frequent and severe droughts and storms. Here on the coast, the sea isn't just our bread and butter, it's our life.

Conservation practices could alleviate the need for the plant altogether. Santee Cooper customers already have cut 725 megawatts from demand through efficient practices and the use of alternative fuels and energy sources, such as solar power, to meet energy demand. The idea's not far-fetched: South Carolinians use more electricity per person than 46 other states. We have much to gain.

And conservation doesn't rest solely on the consumer's shoulders. If Santee Cooper increased its efficiency by 1 percent a year, there would be no need for the plant. A study released this fall by the state's 20 electric cooperatives shows that South Carolinians can cut their electricity use by about a third and state utilities can get at least 3 percent of their power from renewable sources.

We hold our own futures, and our children's futures, in our hands and have the opportunity right now to battle this threat against our health, economy, livelihoods and environment.

The threat is closer and costlier than you think.

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