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Santee Cooper Claims Green Future, but Still wants Coal Plant

Ridin' Green and Dirty: Santee Cooper claims it's environmentally friendly but still wants a new coal plant

By Stratton Lawrence

"If you've heard the term 'clean coal,' that's kind of like a healthy cigarette," says Blan Holman, senior attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center. "There's no such thing as a clean coal plant."

Santee Cooper, the state-owned power company that generates electricity for much of the Lowcountry and Pee Dee areas, has proposed a brand-new 1,300 megawatt coal plant to be built on the banks of the Great Pee Dee River in southern Florence County. They were issued a draft air permit by DHEC (Department of Health and Environmental Control) on Oct. 9, inciting the ire of conservation groups who believe the Army Corps of Engineers' environmental impact statement should have been completed prior to the issuing of permits.

Representatives of the Conservation Voters of S.C., the Southern Environmental Law Center, and the S.C. Wildlife Federation gathered in Columbia last Thursday, Oct. 25, to consolidate their opposition to the plant. They claim it will add 138 pounds of mercury and 8.7 million tons of carbon dioxide to the air each year (S.C. currently emits 39 million tons), and destroy 100 acres of riparian wetlands. Seemingly on cue, an op-ed piece from Santee Cooper President and CEO Lonnie Carter appeared that morning in *The State* (and on Wednesday in *The Post and Courier*).

"For more than two decades, Santee Cooper has been a leader in protecting our environment," writes Carter, heralding the utility's research on renewable energy sources. Carter touts the recent creation of a new position, the vice president of conservation and renewable energy, and says the company's goal is to produce 40 percent of its energy from non-greenhouse gas emitting sources by 2020, an increase from an estimated 23 percent currently. Much of that could come from new nuclear facilities being discussed.

Carter's 650-word editorial never uses the word "coal," but it does defend what Santee Cooper calls the "new Pee Dee Energy Campus," which will utilize the "best



Coal-fired power plants, like SCE&G's Canadys station on the Edisto river (pictured here), are the top culprits among greenhouse gas emitters. It's estimated that Santee Cooper's proposed plant on the Great Pee Dee River in Florence county would spew 8.7 million tons of carbon dioxide and 138 pounds of mercury into the air each year

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environmental control technology" to reduce nitrous oxide, mercury, sulfur dioxide, and particulate matter emissions that result from burning coal. Without the coal plant (or Energy Campus, depending on whose terminology you use), Carter claims S.C. will face a 600 megawatt shortage by 2013 and brownouts will threaten not only homes, but schools, hospitals, and nursing homes.

"Even our strengthened conservation and renewable initiatives will contribute only modestly to meeting this projected shortfall," says Carter.

Conservationists disagree that the threat of brownouts is imminent. "The plant's proponents are using a lot of scare tactics to make it seem like opposing it would harm South Carolina," says Conservation Voters Executive Director Ann Timberlake. "They say if we don't build this plant, the lights won't go on, but that's just not true. But it may just be a more efficient utility who provides the juice."

According to a 2003 U.S. Department of Energy study, the Palmetto State lags behind the nation in efficiency, with 55 percent of households using more than the U.S. average amount of electricity. Timberlake and the Law Center's Holman cite a recent study by the S.C. Electric Cooperatives, claiming that renewable energy could generate 655 megawatts by 2017, and efficiency programs could save the state 980 megawatts in that same time period. If Santee Cooper adopted those same efficiency measures, they estimate that 2,600 megawatts of clean energy could be produced.

"Those numbers are for a good program — not the best or worst, but the middle of the line," explains Holman. He cites efforts by investor-owned utilities like Duke Power and Progress Energy, both of which have launched consumer-efficiency programs to save upwards of 2,000 megawatts in the coming years. "Why is the state of South Carolina about to embark on a billion-dollar coal plant when private utilities are showing that there are ways to generate power that are cheaper and don't have this environmental impact?" asks Holman.

Santee Cooper spokesperson Laura Varn says that meeting the state's power needs requires a mixed approach. "It takes building the cleanest facility available, and doing more of the conservation and renewables to meet our power goal for 2013," she says. Company president Carter says the new plant is consistent with the company's "decades-long commitment to environmental responsibility."

Based on the utility's touting of smokestack scrubbers and "clean coal" methods, the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce has endorsed the project as well. "The Energy Campus is addressing the demand for more low-cost power while creating jobs and improving the quality of life for the people of S.C.," said Chamber President Charles Van Rysselberge in a recent release sent to *City Paper*.

Quality of life is a subjective factor, and conservationists argue that building a plant that degrades air and water quality doesn't match that claim. S.C. Wildlife Federation President Ben Gregg points to the 3,000 children in Florence County with respiratory

illness as evidence that another air-polluting plant is a mistake. He also cites DHEC's fish consumption advisory due to mercury levels in every single river along S.C.'s coast. The Federal Drug Administration says that one pound of methyl mercury can contaminate 500,000 pounds of fish tissue, and it's estimated the plant will emit 138 pounds a year.

"I don't think anybody believes that Santee Cooper's board has any malice in their hearts, but I think that they may not have had all the information that they needed to make the fiduciary call on whether or not this is a wise investment for South Carolina," says the Law Center's Holman. Increased public pressure for government action on global warming may soon lead to a carbon-credit trading policy, where polluters buy the right to emit greenhouse gases. That cost would fall upon taxpayers and result in higher power bills. "We need an independent third party to come in and look at the potential costs and trade-offs," says Holman. "Santee Cooper hasn't done that, and they need to."

DHEC has scheduled a public hearing about the plant for 6 p.m., Nov. 8, at Hannah-Pamplico High School in Florence County, and they're accepting public comments through Dec. 7. The Army Corps' environmental impact statement is expected sometime in early 2008, but DHEC says they're not required to take that into account, although their mandate does require they consider more favorable alternatives.

"We are presenting them with a ton of better options than building an old-style coal-fired power plant in the Pee Dee region, which already has some of the highest asthma rates in the country," says Holman. "There are better available options, and DHEC should be very aggressively pressing for those. If they persist in making bad decisions, they will get challenged."

Despite their efforts to portray their new coal plant as "green," Santee Cooper will likely face a hard legal road to get the plant up and running by 2013, when they estimate power shortfalls will begin.

Give DHEC your input at www.scdhec.gov/environment/baq/SanteeCooper.aspx