

Groups protest proposed Kingsburg coal plant

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By Jamie Durant

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FLORENCE — Conservation groups, health-care professionals and Pee Dee residents gathered Wednesday in front of the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control Region 4 Headquarters in Florence to protest the proposed Santee Cooper coal plant in Kingsburg.

The 600-megawatt coal-fired generation facility, located on a 2,709-acre tract in Kingsburg along the Great Pee Dee River, is scheduled to be operational after 2012. Although Santee Cooper officials say the plant will be one of the cleanest coal plants in the state, many citizens and conservation groups disagree.

Ben Gregg, executive director of the South Carolina Wildlife Federation, said he thinks the issue of mercury contamination of the river is coming to the forefront in South Carolina.

“People in this state are realizing we’ve got a big problem,” he said. “We’ve got two state agencies under the microscope today — state agencies that were created to improve the quality of life in South Carolina.”

The two agencies Gregg referred to are Santee Cooper and DHEC. He said Santee Cooper no longer has the best interests of the people of the Pee Dee in mind. “Santee Cooper needs to go back to the drawing board and take another look at the proposed power plant,” he said. “DHEC needs to take a second look at this, too.” DHEC officials have said in the past that the waters of the Great Pee Dee River were contaminated with mercury, Gregg said, and yet the agency issued a draft air permit for the proposed coal plant despite the potential mercury output levels.

“It’s the equivalent of going to your doctor for diabetes and him telling you to cure it, you need to eat more sugar,” Gregg said.

Pee Dee River Watchers spokesman Mike King said the organization is comprised of sportsmen who live and fish in and along the Great Pee Dee River. “We’re actually afraid of the fish,” he said. “We know that the contamination of mercury is off the charts.”

King said a recent study by The (Charleston) Post & Courier tested the mercury levels in humans, and the numbers were ridiculously high.

The organization intends to present a petition signed by 500 people who live in the Kingsburg area to DHEC at the draft air permits meeting at Hannah-Pamplico Elementary/Middle School on Nov. 8.

“We think that Santee Cooper is steamrolling us,” King said.

Some local activists said they oppose the plant for medical reasons. Dr. Weave Whitehead, a pediatrician at McLeod Health, said the amount of mercury plant would put into the river could cause significant harm to local children.

“Coal power produces two major health concerns relating to children’s health,” he said. “As a pediatrician, I have seen an increase in childhood asthma and respiratory problems. I am opposed to the dirty air that would be produced by coal power.”

The second issue Whitehead said he has with the proposed coal plant is mercury. “The toxic effects of mercury are well-known, not only in children, but in developing fetuses and moms,” he said. “These are my future patients that are being affected. So for the people who live in and around these rivers, including me, who enjoy fishing and eating their catch, it’s a sad day that we can’t really do that.”