



## Organization weighs in on proposed coal power plant

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By Jamie Durant

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The battle for the right to build a coal-fired power plant on the banks of the Great Pee Dee River continues to rage between Santee Cooper and local environmental groups, but recently a new group added their voice to the discussion.

Joe Lucas, executive director of Americans for Balanced Energy Choices (ABEC) sat down at the Morning News office to discuss why his organization thinks the power plant is not such a bad thing after all.

The 600-megawatt coal-fired generation facility, which would be located on a 2,709-acre tract along the Great Pee Dee River, is scheduled to become operational sometime after 2012.

ABEC began in April 2000 with 10,000 members, but it now boasts 150,000 members. The organization doesn't hide the fact that its funding comes from coal, utility and railroad companies.

Lucas said neither Scana nor Santee Cooper is one of the organization's contributors, however.

"These are people who just don't buy in to the false choice that is often presented," he said. "There are folks who say you can have affordable domestic energy and you can use coal, but if you do that, you can't protect the environment."

Lucas said he and the members of the organization think both could be achieved with a little work. During the past 30 years, the economy has grown, the population has grown and reliance on coal has grown, but at the same time the growing demand for electricity has been met.

"Because of technology, air quality is better than it has been in a generation," Lucas said. "That's (due) in part also to cleaner cars, cleaner power plants (and) cleaner dry cleaners. Everything is working."

People who are members of the ABEC think it is possible to protect the environment using methods other than solely conservation, Lucas said.

"We don't buy into the notion that you can't have your cake and eat it, too, because we've proven that you can," he said.

Although the timing of the visit might imply a connection to the proposed coal plant, Lucas said the primary reason for the meeting was to get the organization's message out to voters. The organization is traveling throughout the primary states during this time when votes are being decided to try to convince people that coal is not the enemy.

Lucas said changing America's primary power source from coal to another form of energy would affect more than just the power plants.

"Some people's answer to the climate issue is, let's just use less or no coal," he said. "But displacing coal is not as easy as taking a plug out of one outlet and into another."

The type of power produced by solar, wind and bio-energy is all very different from the type of energy produced by coal, Lucas said. Although the environment is important, he said, so is low-cost energy.

"Coal is less than a third of the cost of other fuels," he said. "People are very concerned about the cost of energy."

Pushing the issue of alternative, often more expensive energy choices could result in some people having to make the choice between "heating or eating," Lucas said.

Making the switch to an alternative form of energy is one step that will have to come gradually, Lucas said. Until that point, he said, the goal of the ABEC is to make sure that coal is being used as cleanly as possible.

"Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good," he said. "The reality is, it takes about 10 to 12 years from the time somebody proposes a plant, they go through all the due diligence, they go through the siting process and construction before they start generating electricity. So the process and the technology applications that Santee Cooper or anyone else is having to make has to be based on today's availability to meet tomorrow's needs."

Holding up the process and forcing the hand of a power company to make a decision immediately about the technology to be used may not be the best way to ensure to best technology 10 or 20 years down the road, Lucas said.

"We can do this. It's just not going to be as easy as some people want you to believe," he said.

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