

Much of the supposed benefit of the coal plant is illusionary

Thursday, Jan 17, 2008 - 10:33 AM Updated: 11:12 AM

By **DAVID L. GREEN**, Editor

The Weekly Observer, Hemingway, SC

While I am a strong supporter of bringing jobs and economic stability to the area, a lot of research and thoughtful reflection has led me to oppose the building of the coal plant. I believe the true costs are being glossed over, and the benefits are exaggerated. One issue that has been ignored is that almost all of South Carolina's energy dollars - about 18 billion dollars - are going out of state, which is a huge drain on our economy. Hydroelectric is only about 3% of our energy and that is reduced during drought years. The rest goes to purchase coal, gas and other fuels from out of state. The development of more energy sources from within the state, such as wind and solar power, would help us keep those dollars circulating at home.

An interview by Walter Edgar of the State Energy Officer, John Clark last weekend gave these figures and clarified many of the issues and problems with coal plants, as well as outlining some of the alternative energy sources.

Further, the real cost of the energy production from coal is not being paid by the generating agencies, or the users.

While technology has somewhat reduced the pollution, it has not removed it, and some pollutants like mercury are almost impossible to clean up. Mercury has already made it risky to eat fresh water fish from most of our state's rivers. Acid rain degrades all our environment by weakening and killing plants, and by corroding metals and dissolving mortar and concrete. And carbon dioxide added to the atmosphere creates climate changes that could flood our coastline and create more superstorms.

Added to that are the thousands of acres of some of the most beautiful land in our nation being turned into a wasteland that is almost useless for anything. As a former resident of Kentucky, I've seen the barren piles of mine waste, the mountaintops that are chopped off, and the streams that are poisoned by strip mining. I've seen the people who are displaced, others whose lives are shortened by exposure to coal dust.

Whenever we are able to slough off the real costs of our actions to others or to a faceless public, it requires a strong moral sense to do the right thing.

Perhaps it would be easier to consider the moral import of our actions when we realize that, in effect, we are passing on the full costs of our cheap energy to our children and grandchildren.

To be truly moral, we must design our systems to be sustainable - if our descendants will

be impoverished by what we do, it is wrong.

There is enough wind power along our coastline to produce, in an environmentally benign way, the equivalent of the entire electrical production of either of our state's largest utilities, said Clark.

Clark noted that there are state and federal tax breaks, so that anyone who installs solar panels can have 55% of the installation cost paid for. Once installed, there is little further cost for many years.

Some critics say that if solar power needs subsidies to compete, it's not a good idea, but what is not well known is that coal has had a lot of subsidies for many years. Finally Clark noted the cost of two new coal plants would run about 2 billion dollars, with another 8-10 billion to buy fuel and maintain the plants for their life span. The same amount of money invested in energy savings through more efficient use, could more than match the production of these plants.

My own experience tends to confirm this. Replacing our outdated home heating and air system with an energy efficient unit halved the electric bill.

Over a year ago I discovered a brand-new type of light bulb that cuts energy use by about three quarters to produce the same amount of light. We've been replacing our home lights with these bulbs. The best part is that they last for many years - a big help when it comes to replacing bulbs in hard-to-get-at places. These bulbs were hardly known a year ago; now there is a move to federally mandate them.

Another help is the move toward "green" homes, which are engineered for energy efficiency. The cost of a new green building runs about 3% more, but the savings in energy over its life span runs 15% or more.

We need to think of the earth as an island. A study of island cultures showed that some people learned how to live within the resources that were available and these cultures lasted. Others did not plan their lives as well. When they used up their resources, they died out.

If we expect to continue our culture, we must learn to live within our means. One small part of this is NOT to build another coal plant. We must seek sustainable alternatives.