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Time to speak out on coal-fired plant

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It's easy to dismiss what's happening elsewhere in the state as something that won't directly affect our lives on the coast.

But we'd be wrong to do that in the case of the proposed coal-fired power plant in the Pee Dee. The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control has issued a draft air permit to allow Santee Cooper to build the plant in Florence County. The draft permit opens up public comment on whether the state should allow the plant's construction. A final permit could be issued as early as January. That means now is the time to speak up. The 60-day public comment period closes Dec. 7.

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 \$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 conservation and better management practices could keep the lights on and protect our health and environment. The idea's not far-fetched. South Carolinians use more electricity per person than residents of 46 other states. We have a lot of room for improvement.

In fact, 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.

But conservation shouldn't rest solely on consumers' 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.

Coal-fired plants are 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. Burning it releases mercury, sulfur and nitrogen, all byproducts that pose grave health problems for plants and animals.

So why build it? Coal-fired plants are a relatively cheap energy solution. But as coal supplies dwindle, the cost of coal will increase. And new federal tariffs aimed at reducing 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 enters the rivers from the air. The proposed 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.

Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is linked to global warming, rising sea levels and more frequent and severe droughts and storms.

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We have the opportunity now to battle this threat against our health, economy, livelihoods and environment.

The threat is closer and costlier than you might think.

 Santee Cooper Proposed Coal-Fired Power Plant

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