

Power plant protesters say no to coal

Groups gather at DHEC office to voice concerns over proposed facility

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FLORENCE — Holding signs saying "No more dirty coal!" and "Coal poisons our air & water!" representatives from six conservation groups and other protesters gathered Wednesday outside a state health office in Florence, demanding that state regulators nix Santee Cooper's proposed coal-fired power plant and begin studying mercury levels in people.

Standing outside the local office of the state Department of Health and Environmental Control, organizers said they called the protest after reading a series called "The Mercury Connection" that began Sunday in The Post and Courier.

The newspaper paid to test people who eat fish from two mercury hot spots in the state and found some with unusually high levels of mercury.

Santee Cooper wants to build a \$1 billion coal-fired power plant on the Great Pee Dee River in Florence County. The utility says it needs the plant to meet energy demands in the booming Grand Strand.

Demonstrators said the newspaper series showed that the state needs to take a stronger stand against mercury polluters. Ben Gregg, executive director of the South Carolina Wildlife Federation, noted the proposed plant could release as much as 138 pounds of mercury a year.

"There is a mercury triangle," Gregg said, referring to an area the newspaper identified as having some fish with mercury levels so high they would be illegal to sell on store shelves. "And Santee Cooper wants to build the power plant right here, right in the midst of that triangle."

In response, Laura Varn, Santee Cooper's vice president of media and community relations, said the utility takes the issue of mercury emissions "very seriously, which is why our mercury emissions are four times lower than the levels allowed by law."

She said the utility plans to use the best technology available to make the Pee Dee plant "one of the cleanest in the country." The utility also has set a new target to have 40 percent of its energy from sources other than coal.

The newspaper's series also found that DHEC has had state-of-the art equipment to test people for mercury for three years but has only done one test on a member of the public.

Nancy Cave of the Coastal Conservation League called on DHEC to "start testing people at risk for mercury (exposure). They have the equipment, and this needs to be done today."

Adam Myrick, a DHEC press officer, said the agency had no comment until it heard directly from those calling for testing.

Three weeks ago, DHEC issued a draft permit for Santee Cooper's plant. Supporters and opponents of the plant are girding for the first public hearing on the draft permit Nov. 8 at Hannah-Pamlico High School in Pamlico.

Several of the roughly 25 protesters said DHEC should have done in-depth studies before issuing the draft permit. Kenneth Kammer, a doctor in Florence, said, "DHEC isn't doing its job to protect the public health."

Mike King, who lives just miles from the proposed site, said he and others have collected nearly 400 signatures from people from the Kingsburg and Pamlico areas opposing the plant. "We consider this dirty coal plant a Trojan Horse," he said. "Santee Cooper promises jobs, but inside this horse there is poison."

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