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Santee Cooper criticized for coal plants

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COLUMBIA, S.C. - Environmentalists and the state-owned utility company locked horns Thursday over a proposed coal plant in Florence County, S.C., that - if constructed - will provide electricity to the entire state.

Representatives of environmental groups met in Columbia to protest the construction of the Santee Cooper plant, arguing that the company should focus instead on finding a cleaner, cheaper energy source.

"Now is the time to lead and seize opportunities to build our local economies," said Ann Timberlake, executive director of Conservation Voters of South Carolina. "Now is not the time to build another dirty coal plant."

Santee Cooper provides electric and water service to customers in three Lowcountry counties, but also generates the power distributed by the state's 20 electric cooperatives to more than 685,000 customers in all 46 counties.

Santee Cooper projects it will need to be producing another 600 megawatts of power by 2013, enough to power 300,000 homes, in order to meet the needs of a growing population and increasing demand.

Company officials are seeking federal and state permission to construct a \$1 billion plant.

The state air-quality permit application is for a plant with two coal-burning boilers that together can generate 1,320 megawatts of electricity, but Santee Cooper spokeswoman Laura Varn said the Santee Cooper board only has authorized the construction of one.

Varn said the plant would provide electricity to residents all around South Carolina.

The crux of the disagreement is over whether current technology is capable of producing the amount of energy Santee Cooper needs in an economically feasible manner.

Santee Cooper said no.

Environmentalists think the answer is yes, particularly if utility companies lead efforts to promote energy efficiency - essentially, focusing on decreasing the demand for energy instead of focusing on increasing the supply.

"The question is not whether or not there's going to be power in South Carolina. That's not the question," said Blan Holman, senior attorney with Southern Environmental Law Center. "The question is: How are we going to get it?"

Critics have said coal plants emit carbon dioxide that contributes to global warming and mercury that, if ingested, is harmful to humans.

Santee Cooper has responded, however, that it is pursuing renewable energy forms.

Last Friday, the company announced a plan to create 40 percent of its energy from non-greenhouse gas emitting resources, biomass fuels, energy efficiency and conservation by

2020.

But alternative-energy technology isn't yet advanced enough to keep up with South Carolina's energy needs, the company says.

So Santee Cooper is trying to pursue alternative energy sources while also building a coal plant that is as environmentally friendly as possible, Varn said.

"The combination of those two things will make sure that reliable, affordable power is available for South Carolinians," she said.

The intensive approval process means that, even if Santee Cooper secures federal and state permits, construction of the plant is years away.

Santee Cooper hopes to have it operational around 2012.

The company is preparing an environmental impact statement as part of its application for a federal wetlands permit.

The state Department of Health and Environmental Control has issued a draft air-quality permit giving permission for the plant's construction, but spokesman Thom Berry warned against reading too much into that.

"It does not give any indication of what our ultimate decision is going to be," Berry said.

A public hearing is scheduled for Nov. 8 in Pamplico, near where the plant would be built.

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