

Santee Cooper focuses on efficiency

Company sets goal for alternative fuel use but still plans to build coal plant

By SAMMY FRETWELL
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The state-owned Santee Cooper power company will try to rely more heavily on conservation, efficiency and alternative fuels to produce energy for its customers by 2020.

Santee Cooper's board set a goal Friday to create 40 percent of its energy from biomass fuels and sources that don't emit greenhouse gases — as well as through conservation and efficiency.

The company has drawn fire over a proposal to build a coal-fired power plant in Florence County at a time of increasing concerns about global warming and mercury pollution in South Carolina rivers. Air pollution from coal-fired power plants is a major contributor to climate change and mercury buildups in fish.

Environmental groups have criticized Santee Cooper for not paying enough attention to conservation and efficiency, rather than building a new coal plant.

Lonnie Carter, chief executive at Santee Cooper, said the company still plans to build the new coal-fired plant to meet immediate demands in eastern South Carolina. He said the company's conservation and efficiency efforts are as good as any power company's, but the 40 percent goal is to meet longer-range needs.

Agency spokeswoman Laura Varn said the new effort could delay the need for other coal-fired power plants in the future. One alternative source is nuclear power, which the company is pursuing.

"If this works long term, that will be an option — we don't need to look at building conventional sources," Varn said.

At Friday's meeting, Santee Cooper's board also approved the creation of a new job to oversee conservation and renewable energy efforts. Marc Tye, a 23-year company employee, will head the effort.

Bob Wislinski, a spokesman for environmental groups opposing the coal plant, wasn't impressed with Santee Cooper's decision. It's fine to seek to be more efficient long term but the company still should abandon plans for the coal-fired power plant, he said.

"To me, you can't go out and wrap yourself in a green cape while you're still building a pulverized coal plant," he said. "It's like a thief saying he won't rob any more banks after the next one."

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