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Proposed coal-fired plant assailed

Conservation groups claim studies show state could meet energy needs without it

By SAMMY FRETWELL

sfretwell@thestate.com

Conservation groups are using two recent utility studies to argue against a nearly \$1 billion coal-fired power plant in Florence County.

The studies, completed last month for the state's electric cooperatives, bolster arguments that South Carolina and its cooperatives could produce enough electricity — through renewable energy sources and efficiency programs — to offset the need for the plant, representatives of major environmental groups said Thursday.

One of the cooperatives' reports contain data showing that small rural utilities could collectively save 980 megawatts of electric capacity through efficiency programs in the next decade. The other study shows the state could generate up to 655 megawatts from renewable energy sources by 2017.

"These are real numbers," said Blan Holman, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. "What they show is that in South Carolina, the stated need can be met through cleaner ways."

The new Santee Cooper coal plant would generate up to 1,320 megawatts of power. South Carolina's electric cooperatives, which generally serve rural areas, get power from state-owned Santee Cooper.

Laura Varn, a spokeswoman for Santee Cooper, said environmentalists were taking data in the studies out of context. The studies rely on ambitious programs that would be difficult to put together over the next 10 years, she and cooperatives lawyer John Tiencken said.

"As it regards energy conservation and renewable energy resources, we have long been a leader in those efforts," Varn said.

Last week, the company's board set a goal by 2020 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.

Thursday's exchange is the latest over Santee Cooper's plan to meet future energy demands. The company says it needs to build the power plant by 2014 as eastern S.C. grows. It says the plant won't have a major environmental impact.

A coalition of the state's biggest environmental groups, including the Sierra Club and the S.C. Wildlife Federation, says the plant will pollute the environment with about 9 million tons of carbon dioxide and more than 100 pounds of mercury each year. Some species of fish in the Great Pee Dee River are unsafe to eat because of mercury poisoning.

Conservation groups noted Thursday dozens of other electric utilities, including Progress Energy, have backed away or been defeated in plans for new coal-fired power plants. Pollution from coal-fired power plants are among the leading contributors to global warming, which is causing sea levels to rise and threatening crops and wildlife.

Reach Fretwell at (803) 771-8537.

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