

Group seeks mercury tests

DHEC urged to check residents before new power plant approved

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For most of her life, Terry Cook has eaten fish from the Great Pee Dee River, never realizing the potential danger to her health.

Now, the 42-year-old grandmother suffers memory lapses — and she wants the state's environmental protection agency to see if mercury from the fish has caused her problem.

Cook is among a group of Pee Dee residents and doctors who asked the agency Thursday to test people for mercury poisoning, before approving a nearly \$1 billion power plant that will release more of the toxic metal.

The Department of Health and Environmental Control has said since the mid-1990s that mercury was polluting the fish people eat from coastal plain rivers, including waterways near Cook's home in Florence County.

But it has posted few warning signs on rivers. The agency also has done little to see how eating the fish has affected human health, critics said. Equipment DHEC acquired about three years ago has been used rarely to test people for mercury poisoning.

"I think they should provide this testing at no cost to the people of South Carolina," Cook said, adding that many people in her community can't afford to see a physician. "People won't go to the doctor when they are sick. They can't do it."

Cook's call was bolstered by a handful of doctors, who held a news conference Thursday outside DHEC's office in Florence.

"Testing is overdue and should commence immediately," said Ken Kammer, a doctor concerned about the Santee Cooper plant.

Mercury is a heavy metal that wafts from coal-fired power plants, settles into rivers and builds up in some species of fish, such as bass and catfish. People who regularly eat those

fish can suffer nervousness, kidney damage and memory loss. Mercury also can cause birth defects and brain damage in children.

Across South Carolina — which has about a dozen coal-fired power plants — the state has advised people against eating more than moderate amounts of some fish from 61 waterways. That includes 42 rivers and 19 lakes. Among them are the Congaree and Wateree rivers near Columbia; the Great and Little Pee Dee rivers near Florence; and lakes Marion and Moultrie near Sumter.

Mercury also is polluting some salt water fish. More than a dozen people tested recently for The (Charleston) Post and Courier had high levels of mercury.

Retired Florence physician Bernetha George, who practiced medicine in Maryland for decades, said agencies across the nation could have done more.

But now, she said “DHEC has a golden opportunity to step forward and live up to its mission by looking into this.”

“Why haven’t they done it? It would seem the prudent thing to do,” she said.

DHEC spokesman Thom Berry said the agency was considering a recent request, but he did not elaborate. In a Nov. 14 letter, some Florence doctors asked the agency to launch mercury testing in humans.

“We are reviewing it; that’s all we’ll say,” Berry said.

The power plant, pushed by state-owned Santee Cooper, will release 138 pounds of mercury each year in an area with mercury pollution in fish.

Santee Cooper, which supplies about 2 million customers, has said the plant will meet federal pollution standards. Spokeswoman Laura Varn said it’s not possible to build the plant — proposed for future power needs — without mercury releases.

“If there was a way to do that, we would do it,” she said. In September, DHEC issued a draft permit for the coal-fired power plant, but has made no final decision. DHEC has extended the deadline to comment on the plant from today until Jan. 22.

Cook, who has five grown children, said DHEC should not forget the needs of citizens. Her mobile home is within a half-mile of the site. Cook is among 600 area residents who signed a petition against the plant.

“I knew very little about (mercury) until this power plant came along,” she said. “I’m beginning to wonder who DHEC works for. I don’t think they’re working for the people of South Carolina.”

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