

Electric Reality: Coal will be a big part of power-generation future

From The Sun News, Myrtle Beach
Posted on Tue, Jul. 17, 2007

Does Santee Cooper have a choice about building a new coal-fired power plant on the banks of the Great Pee Dee River in Florence County? Could the state-owned utility find some other option to meet the burgeoning electricity demands of its customers in Horry, Georgetown and Berkeley counties?

The answer to both questions, as Santee Cooper execs freely admit: Of course it does. Santee Cooper could speed up construction of its planned new nuclear power generator near Columbia. Santee Cooper could dispense with the \$1 billion coal plant - which they admit will add carbon dioxide and traces of mercury to the atmosphere - and focus on more Earth-friendly generating alternatives: solar and wind power, as well as power generated from methane gas that occurs naturally at community dumps.

Still, Santee Cooper focuses on gaining federal and state approval for the proposed 660-megawatt coal plant, for reasons that the S.C. conservation movement has so far failed to refute. Unless the conservationists' goal is to force lifestyle changes on the electric ratepayers that Santee Cooper serves directly and through electric cooperatives, the utility really has little choice but build the coal plant.

True, if people were willing to shut down air conditioners on the hottest days, to ratchet down the thermostat on the coldest nights, to forsake incandescent bulbs for fluorescent bulbs and to cut back on the use of computers, TVs, refrigerators and other energy-sucking appliances, Santee Cooper could likely get by without the Florence County plant. If ratepayers were willing to pay much higher rates per kilowatt, Santee Cooper could push aggressively toward a nuclear solution to meeting electricity demand - though there is still no guarantee that the political environment would allow it.

Solar, wind and methane power generation are attractive nonpolluting alternatives. But given the cost of solar-generation gear, the uncertainty of the winds and the limited supply of methane in S.C. dumps, it is hard to imagine how these technologies could compete with coal - if the goal (as it should be) is to meet electricity demand cost-effectively. Like it or not, the United States is the Saudi Arabia of coal, meaning that coal-fired electricity is going to be part of our energy future.

The faith-based conservationist vision of our communities' energy future is appealing. But how do you get enough electricity consumers to accept higher rates, an uncertain electricity supply and lifestyle changes to allow Santee Cooper to do business differently? The utility's reality-based view of the future assumes our energy consumption habits won't change much, that future new residents and businesses will clamor to hook up to its grid and that above all else, it must always keep the lights on.

The best course for Santee Cooper detractors? Accept coal-fired power generation as a reality and push the utility - hard - to adopt every carbon dioxide and mercury-reduction

technology that comes along. That could raise the retail cost of power a bit, but most readers, we suspect, would see that trade as one worth making.