

## **Don't give up fight against coal-burning plant**

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By Sara Tansey

In a July 17 editorial titled "Energy Reality," The Sun News poses two questions concerning the proposed coal plant in Kingsburg and then offers one very defeatist answer. The editorial asks first if we have a choice about building the new coal-fired plant, and then whether we can find some other option to meet the burgeoning electricity demands of [Santee Cooper's] customers. The answer, unsurprisingly, is that because the alternatives are unrealistic, we have no choice but to build the plant.

But is this the case? Looking at some of Santee Cooper's small renewable projects suggests that several alternative sources might provide a long-term solution to our energy needs, if only we had the foresight and political courage to expand them.

The editorial argues that alternative energy will lead to higher rates, an uncertain electricity supply, and will force upon us unwanted lifestyle changes. The conservation community plays the scapegoat here, blamed for offering a world that, due to unreliable energy sources, has us sweating through hot summer days and shivering through cold winter nights. But what is unreliable about the sun in South Carolina? We are the 13th sunniest state in the country.

And while we have to pay a little more to install photovoltaic solar panels, we don't have to pay the sun. There's an initial upfront cost, but then almost no expense over the life of the panels. How many millions of dollars will we spend as ratepayers to import the 2.5 million tons of coal annually from Appalachian states to feed the plant?

Santee Cooper has already realized the benefits of making the sun work for us. Across the state it has started selling solar power in 100-kilowatt blocks to residential customers and 200-kilowatt blocks to commercial customers. As of a year ago it had 1,349 residential customers and 413 commercial customers. What would it take to increase this program?

Santee Cooper has also invested in gas-to-energy programs in some of the state's largest landfills. South Carolina has no scarcity of landfills, and if we have to live with the eyesores, we might as well put them to good use. In March 2006, Santee Cooper announced a methane gas-generating center at the Richland County landfill that has since provided more than 280 megawatts, enough energy to power 250,000 homes, to 62 gas projects across North America.

While Santee Cooper has argued that these alternatives are not feasible on a large scale, their own cost analyses in favor of coal leave out any mention of the costs, soon to be incurred, by federal regulations that will seek to limit carbon emissions. Just recently, Duke Energy had to revise the estimate for a \$1 billion coal plant in Cliffside, N.C., to \$1.8 billion. If the Kingsburg plant ends up costing us \$2 billion, should we continue to classify renewable energy projects as cost-prohibitive?

Moreover, Santee Cooper has also left out the public health costs that the Kingsburg plant will incur. So with respect to the issue of unwanted lifestyle changes, what about the lifestyle changes this plant will bring to the Pee Dee region? The plant will release thousands of tons of smog and soot-producing pollutants and hundreds of pounds of toxic mercury into the atmosphere every year. Asthma, emphysema, and heart disease: These are the lifestyle choices we will be forced to deal with if this plant is built.

Santee Cooper's mission is to be the state's leading resource for improving the quality of life for the people of South Carolina. So I would like to challenge Santee Cooper not to force upon the state an environmentally harmful, unhealthy source of energy when there's so much hidden potential right there in Santee Cooper's portfolio. The people of South Carolina are innovative, intelligent, and ready to meet the challenge of developing cleaner energy sources. Perhaps what's most disheartening about the July 17 editorial - that it seems to assume otherwise.

The writer lives in Pawleys Island.