



Opposition takes on coal plants

By Bobby Carmichael, USA TODAY
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BLAKELY, Ga. — Sammy Prim says he always thought environmentalists were "a little bit nutty."

Then a New Jersey-based utility, LS Power, decided to build a \$2 billion coal-fired power plant here, just a few miles across the Chattahoochee River from his rural Alabama home. If built, it could emit up to 9 million tons of carbon dioxide, the primary gas blamed for global warming, every year.

"I've been a Republican my whole life, but I'll be doggoned if Al Gore isn't right," says Prim, 64, a retired radiologist. "Is it fair for you and me — this generation — to pollute for all the generations to come when we're already seeing the effects — global warming, mercury, particulate matter?"

So Prim joined Friends of the Chattahoochee, a local group opposed since 2001 to the plant, now a joint venture of LS Power and the Texas-based utility Dynegy. The group is appealing the plant's state-approved air permit, arguing it would allow emissions to exceed standards while pumping out mercury, soot and greenhouse gases.

The greenhouse gas emissions loom especially large. Many environmentalists are fighting the nationwide wave of proposed coal plants because, they say, a few new plants would emit enough carbon dioxide to quickly negate serious efforts to reduce the emissions blamed for global warming.

Take, for example, Home Depot's pledge to plant 3 million trees over the next decade. Combined, all those trees would consume as much carbon dioxide over their lifetime as one new midsize, 500-megawatt coal plant would emit in just 10 days, says Ed Mazria, a lecturer on building-sector greenhouse gas emissions. He based his calculations on U.S. Department of Energy data.

Another example: A California law would require all new cars sold in the state to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 25% (SUVs by 18%). If every car sold in California in 2009 met this standard, Mazria says, a new midsize coal plant would emit enough carbon dioxide in just eight months to negate the law's impact.

"There's no way we can even stabilize, let alone begin reducing, our greenhouse gas emissions if we don't get a handle on coal," says Mazria, who founded Architecture 2030, a non-profit aimed at reducing U.S. emissions.

A boom in coal-fired plants

Nationwide, utilities have proposed more than 185 new coal-fired power plants since 2000 as natural gas prices skyrocketed and energy independence became a pressing concern. Ten of those

new plants are now operating, 32 are under construction or close to beginning, and about 90 others are in earlier phases of development.

"Once they get built, we're obviously not going to tear them down," Mazria says. "And when you see what one of them can do ..."

That's why Bruce Nilles, an attorney who coordinates the Sierra Club's national anti-coal campaign, aims to leave no new coal plant unopposed. In fact, the plant here is one of at least 29 being challenged in court or administrative proceedings across the country.

"We're trying to forge the link between the coal plants and some of the measures" for reducing greenhouse gases, Nilles says. "They can't do anything they are talking about" to reduce emissions "if we build these power plants."

Nilles may be getting that point across. On Oct. 18, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment rejected an air permit for a coal-fired power plant because of its potential carbon dioxide emissions. Utilities have scrapped plans for at least 28 coal-burning power plants since 2000, according to the Energy Department, often because of environmental opposition and increasing construction costs.

Many legal challenges to the plants are directed at the pollution controls that they plan to use. In their appeal, the Friends of the Chattahoochee claim the state failed to make LS Power use the best available pollution controls, as required by a 1990 amendment to the Clean Air Act.

For example, the group says, LS Power has proposed using scrubbers — devices that can remove pollutants from soon-to-be-emitted gas streams — that will capture only 30% of mercury emissions, while other scrubbers on the market can capture more than 90%. The group makes similar arguments about sulfur dioxide, carbon dioxide and particulate matter.

Georgia's department, which approved the permit, had no comment, citing the litigation, but in a report agreed with LS Power that other pollution controls were either not commercially proven or not cost effective. The Environmental Protection Agency has not taken a position on the permit.

It used to be that Bobby McLendon, 67, a retired farm-equipment salesman from Early County, Ga., could honk his horn and get a friendly small-town wave back from anyone in the county. But he says his firm stance against the coal plant, which proponents say would help the county's modest \$7 million budget, has drawn him some cold shoulders around town. At least, McLendon says with a smile, "The preacher still talks to me."

When he first heard about the plant, McLendon, now president of Friends of the Chattahoochee, signed a petition supporting it. "I didn't know a thing about what I was doing," McLendon said. "Jobs. Gonna pay taxes. Sounded good to me. Then my eyes got opened."

The dirtiest of all fossil fuels

What McLendon discovered was that coal, which already generates half the country's electricity, is the dirtiest of all fossil fuels. Energy-related carbon dioxide emissions from coal totaled 2.1

billion tons in 2006, about 35% of total emissions, and as much as every plane, train and automobile combined, according to the Energy Department.

That's why Nilles says it's paramount the USA invest in renewable resources such as wind and solar power rather than more coal plants. "If we don't beat these coal plants, there'll be no market for renewables," Nilles says. "We'll be locked into these emission rates for 50 to 60 years."

That means higher stakes in Early County, where the age-old conflict between environmental concerns and small-town development is playing out.

Billy Fleming, a member of the Early County Development Authority when the plant was proposed, has championed the coal plant since 2001, fighting off claims that LS Power's talk of job creation would never actually benefit the county's poorest people.

"I wouldn't care if they hired just one man to walk in a room and push a red button," Fleming says. "Because the tax basis it'll generate is going to be mind-boggling compared to our tax digest."

Mike Vogt, LS Power's project manager here, says the plant's construction would be a \$2 billion investment in the county, creating 800 to 1,200 construction jobs over four or five years and 100 to 125 permanent jobs. According to U.S. Census data, one-fourth of the 12,065 citizens in Early County live below the poverty line.

Fleming, 61, who also publishes the county's weekly newspaper, says that by the plant's seventh year of operation, taxes and fees on the plant would increase current tax revenue by at least 35%. "I'm comfortable in saying that we did our homework when it comes to 'do we really want one of these in our community?' " Fleming says.

Part of that homework was answering questions about mercury emissions and particulate matter. Coal-fired power plants account for almost 40% of human-caused mercury emissions — the nation's largest source — and are among the largest sources of particulate matter, according to the EPA. Opponents say the 220 pounds of mercury and 1,805 tons of particulate matter the plant could emit each year outweigh any economic benefits it might bring.

William Davis, head of the Blakely-Early County Chamber of Commerce and another proponent of the plant, says those environmental concerns are overblown. "If they didn't build the cleanest plant possible," Davis says, "then they wouldn't permit it."

Prim disagrees, pointing to the air in Houston County, Ala., across the river from Early County. The state projects the county will exceed federal particulate matter standards by 2010. A new coal plant won't help, he says.