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Georgians tell EPD that Plant Washington and coal pose huge risks

Residents crowd hearing, urge state to opt for cleaner, safer, more beneficial energy sources

SANDERSVILLE, Ga. — A diverse cross-section of Georgians packed an elementary school cafeteria in Sandersville Tuesday night to tell state environmental officials that pollution from a planned coal-burning power plant in Washington County posed unnecessary threats to public health and the region's air quality and diminishing water supplies.

More than 300 people crowded into Ridge Road Elementary School, and an overwhelming majority who spoke voiced opposition to the proposed Plant Washington. Tuesday's event was the sole public hearing scheduled by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division on the plant, even though the agency received more than 1,000 letters from people requesting additional hearings in other cities.

As a result, in addition to drawing people from the surrounding area, some traveled hours to the hearing for their lone opportunity to submit comments or testify in person before EPD officials. Repeatedly, they expressed dismay that officials were even considering a pollution permit for the project.

"Coal plants are dinosaurs," said Larry Warthen, who lives in Warthen, not far from Sandersville. "Let's move into the 21st Century. We must put a greater value on the quality of our air, water, our children and their future."

All but 14 of the more than five dozen people testifying expressed similar opinions, saying EPD should not grant pollution permits for Plant Washington. Their concerns touched on issues ranging from mercury contamination and air pollution to depletions of the aquifer in the Oconee River system and the potential risks of toxic coal-ash generated by the plant.

Residents also voiced their fears about electricity rates skyrocketing to pay for the \$2.1 billion project, which many said is unnecessary to meet the incremental increases in demand projected for the area served by the six electric membership cooperatives that want to build it.

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“My biggest objection to Plant Washington is that it is completely unnecessary. Money wasted on this plant could be invested in creating jobs in renewable energy sources and conservation,” said John Swint, a retiree and Washington County native. “Electric rates will certainly go up, either to pay for the plant or to pay for its failure when regulation makes coal unprofitable.”

Others mentioned the threat of Plant Washington’s mercury emissions in their testimony, including Dianna Wedincamp, a resident of nearby Emanuel County whose 14-year-old son fishes often in local blackwater rivers.

“It is unacceptable to me to have to tell him that he can only eat 5 ounces of his fish this month,” said Wedincamp, who works for the Ogeechee Riverkeeper organization and who has three times the amount of mercury in her body recommended by EPA as a result of eating fish her son catches.

A number of waters in Washington and surrounding counties are already so burdened by mercury that children and pregnant women are warned to limit their consumption of fish. If built, the 850-megawatt coal-fired plant would deposit 105 pounds of mercury into Georgia’s air and waters every year, and pose an even greater health risk.

Several people who farm in the area told EPD officials they also had serious concerns about the amount of water that Plant Washington would consume, especially in light of Georgia’s recent drought problems. Plans for the plant call for it to draw as much as 16 million gallons of water per day from the Oconee River or from 15 groundwater wells.

Gubernatorial candidate and Georgia state Rep. Dubose Porter (D-Dublin) traveled to Sandersville for the hearing and said he wasn’t opposed to a power plant, just a *coal* plant. “We have alternatives,” he said. “Let’s put Georgians to work through sustainable and renewables... Coal has too many detrimental effects.”

Midge Sweet, the director of Georgians for Smart Energy, noted that utilities and regulatory agencies across the country are abandoning coal as an energy source for many of the same reasons raised in Sandersville on Tuesday.

“Others get it. They look at coal and see the huge financial risks. They see the threats to public health and the degradation of air and water quality. And when they compare coal to energy efficiency, solar and wind power, and biomass, they realize there’s a far better way that actually will create more and better jobs,” she said. “We have a choice, too. We can mire ourselves in the past and continue paying for the mistake of Plant Washington for generations. Or we can seize the potential of investing in clean energy now and begin building a newer, better Georgia with clean energy.”

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Selected comments from additional testimony given Tuesday in Sandersville also are available on GSE’s Web site. www.georgiansforsmartenergy.org

Georgians for Smart Energy is a coalition of groups that encourages energy efficiency and investments in clean, renewable energy, discourages further investment in outdated energy sources, such as coal-fired power plants. GSE includes a diverse group of grassroots organizations who share the belief that all Georgians will prosper if we invest in clean, renewable energy instead of continuing to rely on outdated, dirty energy sources.