



NW Energy Coalition

Energy Northwest's Proposed Kalama Coal Plant Frequently Asked Questions

What is being proposed?

Energy Northwest wants to build a 600-megawatt electricity-generating plant on an 80-acre industrial site in Kalama, on the Columbia River just south of Longview, Wash. The Port of Kalama has approved a 50-year lease for the site. The plant would use an integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC) process that turns coal (or petroleum coke) into a gas, then burns the gas to make power. The proposed plant – called the Pacific Mountain Energy Center -- is slated to start operating in 2012.

What is Energy Northwest?

Energy Northwest is a public agency made up of 19 public utilities in Washington state. Its governing Executive Board includes five member utility representatives and six non-utility appointees. Energy Northwest owns the nuclear-powered Columbia River Generating Station (at Hanford), a hydroelectric project, a solar-power station and the nation's largest publicly financed wind facility, Nine Canyon.

Who would buy the power?

As proposed, public utilities would buy half the power (300 megawatts). The other half would be owned and marketed by a private company that will partner with Energy Northwest in the development of the project.

How is this plant different from a regular coal plant?

Compared to traditional coal plants, the IGCC (coal gasification) technology promises dramatically reduced emissions of mercury and "criteria" pollutants such as the sulfur and nitrogen oxides that cause smog and acid rain, and a 20 percent increase in efficiency (the amount of electricity produced by a given amount of coal). In addition, an IGCC plant needs only about half the water that a conventional coal plant needs.

So isn't an IGCC coal plant a better option?

While this type of plant does increase efficiency and reduce air pollution, the technology does not reduce emissions of climate-disrupting carbon dioxide. Coal creates far more CO₂ per unit of heat or electricity than any other fossil fuel, and even with the efficiencies, the plant would produce 20-30 percent more CO₂ than a similar natural gas plant and would surely worsen the climate disruption already affecting the Northwest's hydropower supply.

IGCC plants can be built to capture the carbon emissions, but Energy Northwest is NOT proposing to do so. To capture and store the carbon would erase the efficiency gain and possibly double the project's cost. Energy Northwest has noted the lack of proven methods to permanently store ("sequester") vast amounts of CO₂.

Are there other environmental impacts?

Coal extraction, whether done underground or through surface or strip mining or mountaintop removal, assaults our land, contaminates soil and water and destroys critical wildlife habitat. Since Washington does not have the coal resources necessary to supply the proposed facility, the coal will have to be brought in, likely by rail car. A plant this size would likely consume 53 train cars of coal each day.

Areas dominated by pollution-spewing dirty coal plants might benefit from a switch to IGCC, especially if carbon emissions were captured and stored. Issues such as higher costs (including lost opportunity costs of failing to invest in long-term clean energy solutions) and the health and environmental damage done by coal mining and transportation would remain, however.

Do we need more power for our region?

Yes, demand for power will increase as our population grows. Experts predict an annual 1.5 percent increase in regional power needs.

If not with new coal plants, how can we meet these needs?

The Northwest Power and Conservation Council, the entity responsible for regional energy planning, released its 5th Power Plan in 2005 which identified more than 6,000 megawatts (about 2,000 average megawatts) of cost-competitive renewable resources in the region, along with 2,500 average megawatts of very low-cost energy efficiency.

These projections are supported by a history of clean-energy accomplishments. More than 1,000 megawatts of new Northwest renewable projects recently received permits, and projects representing more than 1,000 megawatts are moving through siting processes. Meanwhile, Washington state has a 25-year track record of making our homes, businesses, farms and industries more comfortable, productive and competitive through energy efficiency. The region teems with low-cost clean energy options, and a climate-disrupting coal plant is neither environmentally friendly nor cost effective.

What's the project timeline?

The state's Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council must approve Energy Northwest's permit request, expected to be submitted in 2006. The approval process, once started, will last about 20 months, which should provide concerned citizens ample opportunities for public input and comment.

How can I get involved?

The best way to stop construction of new coal plants is to eliminate demand for coal-derived power. First and foremost, reduce your own electricity consumption as much as possible. Ask your local utility for information on energy efficiency and conservation programs for your home and office. Second, promote statewide policies that ensure development of new renewable resources and take advantage of the region's abundant and cheap energy efficiency opportunities.

For more information on the Northwest's clean and affordable energy future, contact: NW Energy Coalition, 219 1st Ave S, Suite 100, Seattle, WA 98104, (206) 621-0094, nwec@nwenergy.org