

Clean up coal plant, regulators say

Boardman - PGE says pollution controls will raise rates; environmentalists say a plan doesn't go far enough

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Portland General Electric should spend more than \$400 million of ratepayer money in the next decade to cut 80 percent of the haze- and acid-rain causing pollution that spews from its Boardman coal plant, Oregon regulators proposed Thursday.

Environmental groups and Columbia River Gorge advocates, who have threatened to sue PGE to improve controls at Oregon's only coal-fired plant, said the state's proposal doesn't move fast enough or require enough pollution reduction. PGE said it is concerned about the plan's costs, which could boost rates by 3 percent or more.

The plant, 150 miles east of Portland, is responsible for more than half the haze in the eastern gorge at certain times in the winter, a study concluded earlier this year. The pollution also contributes to acid rain in the gorge, on Mount Hood and Mount Adams, and increases haze in 10 protected parks and wilderness areas, from Hells Canyon to Mount Rainier.

The Boardman plant is the largest stationary source of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides in Oregon. It also generates a fifth of PGE's power.

"This will be the single biggest step we can take to improve air quality in the gorge," said Andy Ginsberg, air quality administrator for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. "It will be noticeable."

The Boardman plant, authorized in 1975, just missed having to comply with 1977 Clean Air Act amendments, meaning its controls aren't up to modern standards. Oregon regulators have given the plant a pollution pass for decades, said Mark Riskedahl, director of the Northwest Environmental Defense Center.

"They should have dealt with this facility a long time ago," Riskedahl said. "Now they have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get this right."

Boardman isn't the only source of haze in the gorge. Among the other sources: pollution from the Portland area, from gorge highway traffic, from dairies, from wildfires and from other industries.

But the plant has a particularly big wintertime effect in the eastern gorge, when fog and stagnant air set in, said Michael Lang, conservation director for Friends of the Columbia Gorge. "You can smell the smoke and pollution in the air, and it sits there for weeks at a time." Summer winds typically blow the pollution east to wilderness areas such as Hells Canyon.

The proposal for cutting the plant's haze-causing pollution is three years in the making, driven in part by tighter federal regulations. An earlier agreement will cut mercury emissions by 90 percent.

Burners and scrubbers

The new proposal requires PGE to install updated burners and new scrubbers by 2014 that would reduce emissions of sulfur dioxide by 80 percent and nitrogen oxides by 46 percent. That part of the plan is similar to what PGE proposed last year.

By 2018, the company would have to install a more advanced catalytic reduction system that would chop nitrogen oxide emissions by 84 percent. That goes beyond PGE's proposal.

DEQ bumped the more advanced system 10 years out because it's a major construction job that will require taking the plant offline, Ginsberg said. Pollution reduction systems that don't use ammonia -- itself a haze-causing pollutant -- may also be ready by then, he said.

Environmental groups and gorge advocates said regulators should accelerate the timetable to 2014 or earlier. Federal officials cut a deal with an Arizona coal plant earlier this month requiring it to install the advanced technology by 2014, they noted.

The agency should also bump up the required pollution control to 90 percent or better, they said. That's the equipment's true capability, and a stricter standard would force PGE to keep the machinery well-maintained.

DEQ officials said a 90 percent standard is fine in situations where the aim is to cut summer smog, allowing for easy winter repairs to the system. But it's not realistic for the year-around operation that would be required at the PGE plant.

PGE response

In a statement, PGE called the proposed timetable "aggressive but workable." But spokesman Steven Corson said the costs will likely be far higher than regulators predict.

The company is making huge investments in alternative energy, Corson said, and has to look out for ratepayers as well as the environment.

Boardman is also a "workhorse" in the utility's portfolio, he said. On a hot, stagnant day like Thursday, the coal plant can crank up, he noted, while wind turbines stand still.

The Environmental Quality Commission is expected to consider the plan next spring after a public comment period and more analysis of the economic costs. For details see: <http://tinyurl.com/593yv5>

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