

The Spectrum

Coal plant decision worries locals

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ST. GEORGE — As environmentalists battle with an energy company in Nevada over the Reid Gardner coal-fired power plant, some Southern Utah residents are wondering what the impact might be locally.

Last week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved a set of rules to allow operations to continue at the plant, a 47-year-old facility that has long been controversial because of its location next to an American Indian reservation — in 2005, the state of Nevada sued plant operators for 56 air quality violations.

EPA officials said the steps would improve visibility at five national parks and wilderness areas, including Southern Utah's Zion National Park, by requiring the plant's operator, NV Energy, to install equipment to lower emissions of nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and the fine particle air pollution associated with regional haze.

But environmental groups, as well as the American Indians living beneath the coal plant's shadow, said the new requirements were insufficient.

The Sierra Club released a study it commissioned from Wingra Engineering of Madison, Wis., that indicated the emissions from Reid Gardner, even with the new controls, would still be dangerous to the health of thousands in the area.

The study stated the EPA required "sub-standard Selective Non-Catalytic Reduction pollution controls," which would still allow sulfur dioxide pollution to rise to dangerous levels, according to a written statement from the Sierra Club.

As the fight continues in Nevada, residents in St. George, 45 minutes up Interstate 15 from the Reid Gardner plant, were concerned about whether the plant's continued operation might affect the region's scenic views.

Mike Small, president of the local conservation group Citizens for Dixie's Future, said the most obvious concern is regional haze, which could impact everything from the local scenery to the economic future of Zion National Park.

"We have to be concerned about things that affect our air quality outside of our county," Small said. "And our prevailing winds come from the southwest (and the Reid Gardner plant.)"

William Anderson, chairman of the Moapa Band of Paiutes, said in a written statement the EPA's requirements did not provide for adequate control and the Sierra Club's study revealed some troubling news about sulfur dioxide.

For years, members of the 320-person tribe have attributed illnesses and health issues to pollution from the plant.

"This is about defending our people and our way of life," Anderson said. "It's time to transition the Reid Gardner plant away from coal altogether," he said. "It's just too old and full of problems. It's costing us our very own lives."

The Sierra Club maintains that air pollution from the Reid Gardner plant results in \$28 million in public health costs every year, and group officials said they would continue to fight against the plant's operation.

Those complaints prompted Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., to decry the plant, calling for its closure during the National Clean Energy Summit 5.0 in Las Vegas earlier this month.

"We have to stop further degradation of the land and air as a result of burning coal," Reid told the Associated Press. "The solution is to close the plant. We want the boilers shut off."

NV Energy spokeswoman Jennifer Schuricht released a statement calling the plant a key component of a diverse group of generating plants that "make sense for our customers and ensure reliability and price stability."

NV Energy also makes electricity at seven natural gas-fired plants, 44 renewable projects and one other coal-fired plant near Battle Mountain in northern Nevada.

The publicly traded company described the Reid Gardner plant as providing enough electricity to power 335,000 Nevada households.

“We operate the Reid Gardner Generating Station in the best interests of our customers, in compliance with all federal and state laws, and in an environmentally responsible manner,” the company’s statement said.