

Mich. regulators OK air permit for power plant

By Tim Martin, Associated Press Writer

In the Fresno Bee, Contra Costa Times and other papers, Wed., Dec. 30, 2009

LANSING, Mich.—Michigan regulators approved a key air permit Tuesday that could help clear the way for Consumers Energy to build an 830-megawatt coal-fired power plant near Bay City.

The Department of Environmental Quality's move comes after months of debate about whether the new plant is necessary to meet Michigan's future electricity needs. Environmentalists said they were disappointed by the decision, even though it also requires Consumers Energy to retire up to 958 megawatts of coal-fired generating capacity from its oldest plants in the state.

Under the proposal, the new generator would be built in Bay County's Hampton Township, about 90 miles northwest of Detroit. The utility hopes to have the \$2 billion project online by 2017. It says the project could create up to 1,800 construction jobs and 100 permanent jobs.

"The issuance of the air permit for our new clean coal plant is good news for Michigan," John Russell, Consumers Energy's president and chief operating officer, said in a statement. "This permit moves our project a step closer to creating badly needed jobs and boosting the state's economy."

Consumers, which applied for the air permit more than two years ago, expects to apply next year for a certificate of necessity with the Michigan Public Service Commission.

Staff members at the commission had questioned the need for new coal plants just a few months ago, particularly at a time of growing emphasis on cleaner fuels. The company says the new plant will use technology that allows for cleaner burning of coal than in the units it will replace.

Regulators said that was a key factor in the decision to grant the air permit.

"You are taking away older, dirtier units and replacing them with state-of-the-art technology," said Robert McCann, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

Utilities also argue that Michigan customers could get stuck with higher bills if state-based utilities were forced to buy more power on the wholesale market because their aging coal-fired power plants could not generate enough electricity on their own.

The average Consumers coal-fired power generator is about 50 years old, one of the oldest lineups in the nation, according to state regulators.

But environmentalists say Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm's administration missed an opportunity to prevent the expansion of coal-fired power plants and push the state toward cleaner energy alternatives.

"It's a very poor decision and we're extremely disappointed," said Anne Woiwode of the Sierra Club.

Woiwode said Consumers would have phased out some of its old power-generating equipment regardless of whether it was allowed to build a new plant.

Other proposals for permits related to coal-fired power plants in Michigan are still pending. Among them is an air permit for a 600-megawatt plant near Rogers City proposed by Wolverine Power Cooperative.

Consumers Energy is the principal subsidiary of CMS Energy Corp. The company provides natural gas and electricity to nearly 6.5 million of the state's roughly 10 million residents.

Thick smog chokes Utah

By Mike Stark, Associated Press Writer

USA Today, Wed., Dec. 30, 2009

SALT LAKE CITY — Thick lingering smog trapped along the Salt Lake Valley floor is creating some of the worst air quality in the country.

Pollution levels in some parts of the state on Tuesday exceeded federal standards set to protect the general public.

Provo, Logan and Salt Lake City were ranked among the country's most polluted cities Tuesday on AIRNow, a national index for reporting daily air quality.

Haze is common in northern Utah as winter inversions trap polluted air in the bowl-shaped valley floors. Air quality officials estimate about one-third of the pollution comes from cars and trucks, one-third from industry and one-third from homes and businesses.

Typically, a storm rolls through the area every four or five days to blow the smog out of the valley. It's been a week or so since the last storm, though, and pollution has been building unabated for days.

"This is probably the worst inversion we've seen this year," said Bo Call, manager of air monitoring for the Utah Division of Air Quality.

State air quality officials have issued health advisories for Cache, Salt Lake, Davis, Utah and Weber counties saying that everyone should reduce prolonged or heavy exertion outside. Those with heart or respiratory problems should avoid that kind of activity, state officials said.

Residents are also prohibited from burning wood and urged to drive less.

Light snow fell across portions of Utah on Tuesday but the storm system was unlikely to push out the pollution, Call said. Five counties remain under a "red alert" for poor air quality through Wednesday, when another system is expected to arrive.

The National Weather Service in Salt Lake City said the storm should be strong enough to scour the valley floors of pollution. It may be short-lived, though.

"We could be back to an inversion by Thursday or Friday, and then the cycle starts up all over again," Call said.

In 2006, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tightened air quality standards for tiny flecks of pollution called fine particulates. Pollution levels are tracked hourly and over a 24-hour period in many of the state's populated areas.

Call said overall Utah's air quality has improved but more alerts tend to be issued because of the tighter federal standards.