

Resistance at Desert Rock

It has been snowing in the Four Corners region of the Navajo Nation, near Burnham, New Mexico, where Navajo grandmothers and youth are camped out in the desert, protesting a proposed 1500-megawatt coal-burning power plant. The plant would be built by Sithe Global Power of Houston, Tex., and co-owned by the Dine' Power Authority, a Navajo tribal enterprise. In the Navajo language, Dine' means "the people."

This would be the third coal-fired power plant built on Navajo land, and the first co-owned by the Navajos themselves. But not all Navajos want to own a plant that powers air conditioners in Arizona and southern California by burning 5.5 million tons of Navajo coal each year. "They get the electricity and we get the pollution," said one protester.

In the desert near Burnham, the Dooda ["No"] Desert Rock Vigil has continued since December 12 when Elouise Brown first discovered strangers drilling a water well on Navajo land. In a video available on youtube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T88qZ5TbGrg>), Ms. Brown explains how it all started. She confronted the drillers, telling them they could not continue onto Navajo land. "We live here and I'm just not going to let you go through," she said. The drillers broke past her and she chased them in her car, caught up with them, and blocked their way with her vehicle.

From there, the protest grew. Ms. Brown got her family involved and they decided to camp out on the land. "We're not moving. That's the bottom line. We're going to stay put. We're not leaving the area until they tell us, 'We decided not to build,'" said Ms. Brown, who is a member of Dine' CARE -- Dine' Citizens Against Ruining our Environment.

"Spending Christmas huddled around a campfire and protecting our land is not something that we resisters had originally planned," says Ms. Brown. "Most of us expected large family dinners, Christmas tunes, and gift exchanges," she said. "We are being watched by the police 24 hours/day and every time a vehicle comes by, they charge over and scare the elders and medicine people visiting the Resisters' Vigil," Ms. Brown explained on an internet blog (www.desert-rock-blog.com) set up to keep the world informed about the protest vigil.

After the Dooda Desert Rock Vigil group formed in mid-December, the press began taking notice of the desert encampment, and pressure mounted on Navajo authorities. On December 18, Navajo president Joe Shirley visited the encampment to explain why burning another 5 or 6 million more tons of coal per year was a good thing. The power plant would be clean, he said, and it would create 400 permanent jobs.

But "clean" is a relative term. Coal plants produce major amounts of pollution, even when "strict" regulations require the use of modern pollution controls. The two coal-burning plants already operating on Navajo land tell the story.[1]

The Four Corners power plant, rated at 2040 megawatts, sits on Navajo land in Fruitland, N.M., 25 miles west of Farmington. It is licensed to emit 157 million pounds of sulfur dioxide per year, 122 million pounds of nitrogen oxides (NOx), and 8 million pounds of soot per year. Plus it emits 2000 pounds of mercury.

Fifteen miles northwest of Farmington -- just outside Navajo territory -- we have the 1800-megawatt San Juan Generating Station in Waterflow, New Mexico. It burns an estimated 6.3 million tons of coal each year, releasing more than 100 million pounds of sulfur dioxide (SO₂), more than 100 million pounds of nitrogen oxides (NOx), roughly 6 million pounds of soot, and at least 1000 pounds of mercury.

Just 185 miles to the west lies an even larger coal plant on Navajo land, the 2400-megawatt Navajo Generating Station in Page, Arizona, which burns 8.5 million tons of coal each year, emitting 185 million pounds of sulfur oxides, 143 million pounds of nitrogen oxides, 9 million pounds of soot, and 2400 pounds of mercury.

In 2000, U.S. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) estimated that existing coal plants produce pollution equivalent to 3.5 million automobiles.[2]

The Four Corners area is also dotted with 18,000 active oil and gas wells, which contribute large quantities of volatile organics and nitrogen oxides to the local air. The volatile organics combine with the nitrogen oxides to create ground-level ozone. Add tons of soot, and you've got a deadly combination.

Dr. Marcus Higi of Cortez, Colorado testified recently that he has never seen worse asthma than he encountered on the Navajo reservation where he worked as a physician for four years.[3] "I've seen the worst asthma cases out here near the power plants," he said. "A kid would come in, barely breathing. They're basically on the verge of death." He had to fly five children to hospitals to save their lives, he said. The price for power is health, he said.

In July U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued an air permit to Sithe Global for the Desert Rock plant. In October EPA held two public hearings on the permit it had already issued. At the hearing in Durango, Colorado, Erich Fowler, who lives near Kline, Colo., about 30 miles from Farmington, testified that a yellow haze "as bright as daffodils" blocks his view of Farmington. When clean air mixes with it, "the sky begins to look like it's filled with scrambled eggs," he said.[4]

At the public hearings, testimony revealed that EPA had issued the air permit based on a mathematical model of air quality, but the model did not factor in emissions from the 18,000 active oil and gas wells in the area. Furthermore, the model was based on air measurements taken at only two locations -- one in Farmington and one in Rio Rancho near Albuquerque, 150 miles from the Four Corners area.

According to the Denver Post, the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) estimates that emissions from gas development in the area already have exceeded standards for nitrogen oxides. And the BLM has proposed allowing another 10,000 wells over the next few decades.

Meanwhile, the project is rolling forward. Everyone knows that carbon dioxide and mercury are likely to be regulated more strictly in the next few years, so dirty, old-style power plants are scrambling to get their construction permits now, before the regulations require them to modernize.

To increase its profits from Desert Rock, Sithe Global Power has cut a deal with the Navajo Nation reducing Sithe's taxes by 67%, and Sithe is now negotiating with the San Juan County, N.M. for a similar reduction.[5] The county tax assessor has expressed concern that there won't be enough money to pay for the needed infrastructure -- specifically mentioning the need for additional roads, schools, and jails.

Another part of the infrastructure that would be stressed by Desert Rock is health care. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has reported that "current federal funding levels are insufficient to operate an adequate health-care system for Native Americans." Two members of the Dooda Desert Rock Vigil -- Dailan J. Long and Sarah Jane White -- recently asked, "How are we supposed to deal with the health effects of Desert Rock if there are already severe deficiencies in our health-care system?... Subjecting us to further pollution while there are severe shortages in our health care is environmental injustice in its purest form," they wrote.[6]

– *By Peter Montague (Excerpted from Rachel's Democracy & Health News #889, January 11, 2007)*

[1] The coal in the Four Corners area is sub-bituminous, with a heat value of about 11,000 btus [British thermal units] per pound. Based on the latest pollution-control regulations covering the Four Corners Power Plant and the Navajo Generating Station, we can calculate that each megawatt-year of power requires burning 3540 tons of coal, and results in the emission of 77,000 pounds (lb.) of sulfur dioxide (SO₂), 60,000 lb. of nitrogen oxides (NO_x), 3,900 lb. of soot, and 1 pound of mercury, and consumes 14 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is enough water to cover an acre of land with water one foot deep. For a 1500 megawatt plant, multiply each of these number by 1500 to get annual emissions; for a 2000 megawatt plant, multiply each of these numbers by 2000, and so on.

These figures do not include the extremely large tonnages of toxic coal ash that are produced each year, which are typically buried in the ground. The ash contains polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), dioxins, and toxic metals.

[2] Electa Draper, "Power plant project's future hazy," Denver Post October 5, 2006, pg. B5.

[3] Lisa Meerts, "Doctor Shares Concerns About Adding Another Power Plant," Farmington (N.M.) Daily Times October 13, 2006,

[4] Lisa Meerts, "Colorado residents voice concerns about Desert Rock," Farmington (N.M.) Daily Times October 3, 2006.

[5] Cory Frolick, "Desert Rock needs an alternate tax structure," Farmington (N.M.) Daily Times August 5, 2006.

[6] Dailan J. Long and Sarah Jane White, "Op-Ed: Burnham Residents Barely Breathing, Still Fighting," The New Mexican (Santa Fe, N.M.), Nov. 5, 2006, pg. F3.