

Imported electricity fails state standards -- Coal-fired plants harm environment in West

This is hardly news and Californians don't care.

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California increased its dependence on polluting, coal-fired power plants during the past decade while renewable energy use remained stagnant, according to three environmental groups that released a report Thursday highlighting what one clean-air advocate described as "California's dirty little secret."

About 20 percent of the state's electricity needs are met by importing electricity produced in other Western states by power plants that would not meet air pollution standards here, according to the report.

That power use has measurable effects on the environment in states like Arizona and Nevada, the report says, noting that California's share of coal-burning plants accounts for more than 200 times the amount of mercury produced by all of the state's natural gas plants, and that the plants release 67 million tons of carbon dioxide annually into the air -- the equivalent of 11 million cars.

The plants also have contributed to growing air pollution problems throughout the Southwest, including once-pristine spots such as the Grand Canyon and Zion National Park.

The report comes at a crucial time for Western energy policy. California and the West face increasing pressure to meet surging electricity demand. Skyrocketing natural gas prices threaten to drive up the price of power. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state energy regulators appear poised to take aggressive steps to lessen global warming that may affect power production.

But for all of Schwarzenegger's talk about clamping down on air pollution, California has been relatively slow to develop extensive nonpolluting energy sources such as wind farms or geothermal power generators, instead relying on power produced by burning coal, complained V. John White, executive director of the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies and one of the authors of the report.

"It's California's dirty little secret -- we've had a decade's worth of rhetoric about renewable energy, and a decade's worth of growth in coal," White said.

Titled "Clearing California's Coal Shadow from the American West," the report is the first compilation of California investments in out-of-state power plants and includes arguments for creating more energy efficiency programs and renewable power to satisfy the West's thirst for electricity. Twenty-two new coal-fueled power plants are being proposed throughout the interior West.

Virtually all power plants operated within California use natural gas to turn turbines and create electricity. Natural gas creates less air pollution when burned than most other fossil fuels.

In other Western states, coal is the most typical source of fuel for power plants.

Utilities such as Southern California Edison and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power long have been part-owners in coal-fueled power plants in states such as Arizona and Nevada, and even the state Department of Water Resources owns one-third of a similar plant near the Moapa Indian Reservation in southern Nevada. Other, smaller utilities also own stakes in some plants.

Pacific Gas and Electric Co., which delivers power to most of the Bay Area and Northern California, obtains about 3 percent of its electricity from coal, according to a spokesman.

An Edison spokesman did not return calls or comment.

According to an analysis of statewide energy sources by the Center for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Technologies, California's importation of coal-fueled power grew from 16.5 percent of overall electricity in 1995 to 21.3 percent in 2004. During the same period, the state's use of renewable energy hovered between 9.2 percent and 11.5 percent.

Schwarzenegger and many other California politicians have made a push in recent years to increase the use of renewable energy in power production. Current law requires the state's three largest utilities to obtain 20 percent of their power from sources like the wind and sun by 2017, and Schwarzenegger has said he wants to accelerate that process to require 33 percent by 2020.

The governor also garnered international headlines this summer by setting goals for the state to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases released into the air.

Last week, the California Energy Commission took a major step toward that goal as it relates to electricity production. The commission approved a new rule that will require new power obtained by California utilities to be produced by plants at least as clean as current natural gas-fueled power plants.

Joe Desmond, chairman of the commission and Schwarzenegger's top energy adviser, called the rule "the most aggressive standard in the nation" and argued that it would spark more investment both in renewable energy and in technologies that can make burning coal to create electricity much more environmentally friendly.

Desmond argued that because natural gas prices are rising, coal is an option that California must consider to keep energy affordable.

Schwarzenegger must still sign off on the rule before it goes into effect.

Authors of the report -- which include the groups Environmental Defense and Western Resource Advocates -- praised the Energy Commission's decision but warned that California had sent mixed signals about its energy future.

Schwarzenegger signed a pact earlier this year with the governors of three other states to create a new transmission line, dubbed the Frontier Line, connecting power plants in other states to California. Clean-air advocates worry that it could help spur the proposed coal-burning power plants without enough environmental safeguards, as leaders in other states have not voiced strong support for cleaner-burning coal.

Officials in Wyoming have already hinted they will sue the state over the energy commission's new rule, believing it violates the commerce clause of the U.S. Constitution and will hinder power plant development in their state.

Plant developers in the West argue that their proposed coal projects are much cleaner than existing coal-burning plants