dailycamera.com
your DAILY CAMERA online

BOULDER DAILY CAMERA
Wednesday, January 31, 2007

Study backs coal-plant alternatives

Report endorses renewable energy for Southwest

By Eric Schmidt

The southwestern United States is especially vulnerable to global warming, but the region can help stop climate change by foregoing new coal-fired power plants for conservation measures and renewable energy, according to a study released Tuesday.

If more than a dozen new coal plants planned in Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and New Mexico come online, they will emit as much heat-trapping carbon dioxide — 70 million tons — as 12.5 million cars driving around the region for a year, according to the study's authors. Titled "Climate Alert: Cleaner Energy for the Southwest," the report was issued by Boulder-based Western Resource Advocates and Environmental Defense, a national nonprofit.

With a quickly growing population and increasing demands on the power grid, the Southwest will be challenged to provide for its residents while dealing with air pollution, water shortages and an arid climate in which heat and drought already are concerns, according to the report. But with natural opportunities for wind, solar and geothermal energy, the region also has the potential to become an international test bed for the long-term sustainability of renewable energy.

"Generating electricity is already one of the main sources of global warming pollution," said John Nielsen of Western Resource Advocates, adding that power plants account for about 40 percent of greenhouse-gas emission nationwide. "These proposed new coal plants in the Southwest will just add to this problem."

The report makes seven recommendations as part of a "new energy road map" for the Southwest. They include caps on emissions; energy conservation through appliance efficiency standards and green building codes; addition of renewable energy to utilities' portfolios; requirements that all new coal power plants use advanced pollution controls; and a focus on electric transmission lines in areas rich in renewable resources.

Coal power continues
New coal power plants planned in Colorado include the 750-megawatt Comanche 3 station near Pueblo, a 37.5-megawatt plant near Lamar, the 700-megawatt Tri-State facility in southeastern Colorado and an Xcel Energy plant in the eastern part of the state that would use a more efficient system for burning gasified coal to generate about 300 megawatts. If completed, those plants would emit a combined 12.5 million tons of carbon dioxide annually, according to the report.

The government regulates utilities from a "least cost" perspective, meaning power providers are often obliged to go with the cheapest option unless they can make a compelling case for higher prices, Xcel spokesman Tom Henley said. Xcel's "integrated gasification combined cycle" plant would be the first of its kind in the state, but it could cost 10 to 30 percent more than a conventional power station, he said.

Comanche 3, slated to open in 2010 alongside two existing generators, will add new technology to make the complex's total emissions lower than from the original two plants as part of a settlement with environmental groups, Henley said.

"We're committed to pursuing clean coal technology, and (coal gasification) is a portion of what we hope will be a long-term answer," he said. "In the interim, we're hopeful that the Comanche 3 project will help meet our baseline needs.

"It's no secret that we're a growing state, and generation is only one aspect of it. Developing transmission lines to help move that power — whether it be from fossil- or renewable-based energies — is a portion of that as well."

Climate-change study due Friday

A landmark study from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is set for release Friday in Paris under the auspices of the United Nations. Last updated in 2001, the panel's 2007 report "is expected to project centuries of rising temperatures and sea levels unless emissions of heat-trapping gases like carbon dioxide are significantly curbed," according to the University of Colorado, which had several scientists involved in its publication.

The Eiffel Tower's 20,000 flashing lights will go dark for five minutes Thursday evening, timed to coincide with the report's release.

Taking action

Another study compared a status-quo scenario with a high-efficiency model incorporating renewables and conservation incentives, said Boulder Mayor Mark Ruzzin, an associate with the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project. It found potential for the Southwest to reduce its electric use by 18 percent by 2010 and 34 percent by 2020, saving almost 100,000 gigawatt-hours of electricity by 2020 and eliminating the need for 34 500-megawatt power plants.

"We're not talking pie-in-the-sky, and we're not needing to wait for some magic technological solution," Ruzzin said. "What we're really looking at is aggressive implementation across all markets of existing technology."

California passed laws last year requiring statewide greenhouse-gas emission to be reduced to 1990 levels by 2020 and prohibiting utilities from buying base-load power from operations that don't meet emissions standards. New Mexico aims to reduce its greenhouse-gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2012 and 75 percent below 2000 levels by 2050, while Arizona hopes to limit its contributions to global warming to 2000 levels by 2020 and 50 percent below 2000 levels by 2040.

Colorado lawmakers have introduced nine bills this session calling for biofuels research, wind power for public schools, updated energy codes and other incentives for resource conservation. One bill in the state House would create a Renewable Energy and Infrastructure Authority to develop electric transmission lines targeted at renewable resources.

Gov. Bill Ritter took office Jan. 9 promising a "new energy economy" combining renewable technologies with more efficient use of fossil fuels. In his state-of-the-state speech, Ritter compared energy development to the space race of the 1960s and endorsed a Western Governors' Association call for a 20-percent improvement in statewide electric efficiency by 2020.

"The governor has made renewable energy and the establishment of a new energy economy one of his highest priorities both in the short term and in the long term," Ritter spokesman Evan Dreyer said. "He believes that our economic future hinges on cultivating a new type of economy that is based on Colorado's abundant wind, sun and agricultural resources."

Contact Camera Staff Writer Eric Schmidt at (303) 473-1628 or schmidte@dailycamera.com.