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Published April 12, 2022. Editor's Headline: Clearing the Air for Wyoming's Power Plants

Southwest Wyoming has become an epicenter in the nation's energy transition away from coal, but transitions rarely run as planned. Shannon Anderson, staff attorney at Powder River Resource Council (PRRC), in its most recent publication examines the controversies surrounding stalled action regarding the Bridger Coal Plant near Point of Rocks in Sweetwater County as well as state governmental influence: The governor's office seeks to negate TriState's clean energy goals.

Under a state plan, approved by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2014, the second unit of the Bridger plant was to install control technology to reduce nitrogen oxide pollution by December 31, 2021. However, the plant's operator, Rocky Mountain Power, has not complied, relying instead on an emergency order from Governor Gordon for an additional four months to comply. The company has insisted all along that installing the controls is not economical and that it wishes to shut down Unit 2 along with Unit 1, which faces a similar deadline by the end of 2022. Rocky Mountain Power wants to convert both units to natural gas, yet the company has not filed any Clean Air Permits to set these plans in motion.

Negotiations are underway between the state, the utility, and the EPA, writes Anderson, to arrange a time frame for the units to be converted and, in the meantime, allow the units to continue running on coal. The state and the utility counted on the EPA's approval for a proposal to roll back the pollution requirements, which the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality had approved in 2020.

"Last month, the EPA announced that it is proposing to deny the state's plan amendment, noting that Wyoming and Rocky Mountain Power have failed to justify a switch from the pollution control requirements," writes Anderson, adding that the EPA charges that Wyoming's plan to weaken pollution controls for the Jim Bridger Plant is inconsistent with the Clean Air Act of 1970.

It's likely the utility will have to shutter the plant.

Anderson notes that her organization has maintained "from the beginning that the state plan is technically deficient and legally inadequate, violating the Clean Air Act." She cites EPA Regional Administrator, KC Becker, as saying that Wyoming's revision to its 2014 regional haze plan "is a step backward."

In the same issue of *Powder River Breaks*, Anderson highlights the difficulties in the path of TriState Generation & Transmission, which serves customers in Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. These customers are primarily rural electric cooperative customer-owners, as I am.

“In January, TriState released a landmark settlement regarding the company’s 2020 Electric Resource Plan (ERP),” writes Anderson. The plan documents the utility’s decision to convert from coal to renewables. TriState added two new wind projects in 2021 and will add six additional solar projects by 2024; it projects that 70% of the energy its members consume by 2030 will come from renewables.

PRRC reviewed correspondence through public records requests and discovered that Wyoming officials have been working behind the scenes to keep coal in the TriState system and that “the Governor and his staff have expressed concern to TriState over the company’s clean energy goals.”

One wonders if similar pressure was brought to bear on Rocky Mountain Power, contributing to the inaction that now puts the Jim Bridger Plant at risk.

Here is what’s at stake as devastating storms are hitting parts of the Southern U.S. and Midwest and Antarctica experiences an unprecedented heat wave as IPCC climate-change warnings are at Code Red:

Power plants emit more pollution than cars: According to [Environment America](#), in 2007 power plants emitted three times as much pollution as cars. They released about 2.56 billion tons of pollutants that contribute to global warming. Most of these were from coal plants built prior to 1980.

Every year an uncontrolled coal plant releases harmful pollutants: about 114 pounds of lead, traces of uranium, 720 tons of carbon monoxide, and 220 tons of hydrocarbons that trigger reactions that form ozone at low altitudes. A plant also releases 225 pounds of arsenic in a year, a carcinogenic compound that affects drinking water. All power plants discharge billions of gallons daily of discharge waters that contain chlorine and heavy metals.

About 7,658 power plants exist in the U.S.; of these, coal plants are a leading source of carbon dioxide emissions. In 2011 alone, they spewed 1.7 billion tons into the atmosphere, according to *Arcadia* statistics published 2017 in <https://blog.arcadia.com/15-key-facts-statistics-power-plant-pollution/>

Older power plants contribute the most pollution—and many of Wyoming’s power plants date to before 1980. The Jim Bridger plant is nearly 50 years old; the Laramie River station, the behemoth that dominates my area, is 42, having been commissioned in 1980.

The good news:

Since the Clean Air Act was introduced in 1970, air pollution has dropped. Common pollutants such as carbon monoxide, ozone, sulfur dioxide, and others dropped an average of 70 percent, even though gross domestic product grew by 246 percent, according to the [EPA](#).

Reduced power plant emissions have cut acid rain. National restrictions on air pollution has cut sulfur dioxide emissions, which has reduced the amount of acid rain introduced into lakes and streams. Sulfate deposits, according to the EPA, dropped by over 55 percent in the Eastern U.S. during two separate test trials.

Pollution controls make power plants safer. Flue gas combustion modification reduce partially oxidized nitrogen compounds, while flue gas deacidifiers remove nitric and sulfuric acids via scrubbers.

It follows, so long as we must use coal-fired power plants, we should make sure they comply with EPA standards. Governor Gordon's band-aid alternatives won't cut it. Ditto for discouraging his residents from preferring clean energy.