



LIFT Commentary

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Stoking Lucifer's Furnace

Using environmental and health-based scare tactics as a means to achieve political ends is nothing new. The latest offender is the Texas Clean Sky Coalition, which is using obviously posed photos of dirty-faced children that might as well be stills from “Coal Miner’s Daughter”.

Designed to provoke fear and outrage rather than a reasoned debate about the economic benefits and environmental safety of coal-fired facilities, the web banner ads produced by the Coalition’s public relations machine make coal seem like an option that only Lucifer would accept.

The Coalition produces no evidence that any one living in close proximity to a coal-fired plant has her faced smudged with soot bellowing from an uncontrolled furnace. Texas is a far cry from Dickensian England. Environmental controls on existing and future facilities must meet rigorous standards set by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Yet, the Coalition urges TCEQ and the Legislature to delay (if not stop) proposals for eighteen coal-fired power plants which are designed to meet Texas’ rising electricity needs.

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) published a clear and sound analysis that Texas needs more power plants, and quickly. ERCOT’s econometric model, based on population and economic growth, predicts that as early as summer 2008, demand could strain our existing electricity generation infrastructure, endangering the constant, reliable power supply which is necessary for a large industrial base and for making residents cool in summer and warm in winter.

The coal-fired plants, which the Clean Sky Coalition so vehemently opposes, could keep the reserve margin high enough that ERCOT can guarantee reliable electricity supply until 2015. The coal-fired plants proposed are a timely and necessary means to meet rapidly growing electricity demands.

Perhaps the Clean Sky Coalition's members are spoiled by the success of our retail electric market in keeping our lights and air conditioners running without fail, despite record high temperatures last summer. Others, however, have not been so lucky. Last summer 1.5 million Californians and 100,000 residents of New York City went without electricity because supply was insufficient to meet demand.

Those blackouts directly led to deaths from heat, dehydration, and stroke. The economic and public health imperatives of maintaining a constant supply of electricity to Texas homes and businesses are inviolable.

Since "concerned citizens" (read: practiced, often professional, environmental activists) are walking the halls of the Capitol for an anti-coal citizen day, policymakers should carefully analyze the Clean Sky Coalition's doom and gloom arguments on the emissions from coal-fired power plants, especially that of carbon dioxide. Texas' current carbon dioxide emissions are significantly *less* than the total emissions of thirteen Northeast states that have *less* land area together than does Texas. A more precise and fairer measure would take into account that Texas generates 80% more electricity than the second ranked state.

Furthermore, of the eighteen coal plants proposed, eleven would be built by Dallas-based TXU. Their plan includes not only new technology to reduce emissions from the new plants, but also includes updating technology in existing plants. The end result is that even after the construction of eleven new coal-fired power plants, TXU's total key emissions will be twenty percent less than they are today.

The specter of a public health catastrophe, the Clean Sky Coalition's rickety crutch in opposing new, coal-fired power plants, is unconvincing, and economically-motivated. Some of the corporate financiers behind Clean Sky want us to burn more natural gas, and the environmentalists involved want biomass, wind farms and solar power to heat our homes. The problem is that "alternative" fuels generate just over two percent of the nation's electricity (compared to roughly half for coal and twenty percent for natural gas), and relies heavily on government subsidies and incentives to be workable. Going forward with coal plants now undermines the financial and political designs of the coalition's bedfellows.

There should be a reasonable debate about how best to meet Texans' energy demands, but the Clean Sky Coalition grossly exaggerates the current state of our environment while painting ludicrously alarmist health threats. Here's a suggestion for the Clean Sky Coalition: use coal to meet consumer energy needs rather than smudging the faces of child actors.