

Air Alert: Maryland Must Force Power Plants to Pollute Less

By George Leventhal

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Late last year several protesters -- including a Maryland farmer and a rabbi -- temporarily blocked the entrance to Dickerson Generating Station in western Montgomery County. The coal-fired plant and three others like it in the region are owned by Atlanta-based Mirant Corp. Together, they burn more than 20,000 tons of coal a day to generate most of the area's electricity.

The protesters' message was dramatic: If 700,000 Hummers were driven around the Beltway every day, they said, that would generate about the same amount of carbon dioxide as these power plants do.

But Mirant refuses to reduce or "offset" its greenhouse gas emissions, even though researchers say that planetary warming could lead to a three-foot increase in sea levels in the next 100 years. For a state with 3,200 miles of tidal shoreline, that could mean disaster.

Reps. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and Wayne T. Gilchrest (R-Md.) continue to push for passage of the Climate Stewardship Act, a national strategy for significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions without harming our economy. But President Bush is skeptical.

Meanwhile, the Dickerson plant continues to spew more carbon dioxide each year than is generated by all the registered cars and trucks in Montgomery County. So Del. James W. Hubbard (D-Prince George's) plans to take action on a state level by introducing a "four-pollutant" bill in Annapolis this month.

This bill would require Maryland power plants to adopt technology in use in other states to reduce by 70 percent or more the pollution from nitrogen oxide (which causes smog), sulfur dioxide (a source of acid rain and soot) and mercury (a contaminant of fish). The bill also would require a 17 percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. Power companies could achieve reduction targets for carbon dioxide by improving efficiency, planting trees or buying carbon "credits" from companies that have made greenhouse gas reductions.

The federal Clean Air Act grants states the right to set pollution standards for power plants. That's why two states already have passed four-pollutant bills, and several other states soon are likely to follow. But Maryland has lagged.

Most of Maryland's neighbors -- including Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and North Carolina -- are going beyond federal standards to reduce smog and acid rain pollution from coal-fired plants. Indeed, North Carolina is suing Maryland because pollution from its power plants drifts over the North Carolina mountains.

Every year Mirant ferociously opposes even modest global-warming legislation in Congress. And in Annapolis, the power company's lobbyists make sure that power plant cleanup bills don't get out of committee.

Under the threat of legal action, Mirant recently did agree to cut its nitrogen oxide emissions significantly in the region. But it still refuses to do anything about mercury, sulfur dioxide or carbon dioxide.

Maryland has the fifth-worst air quality in the country, yet Mirant's four coal-burning plants -- one in Alexandria and one each in Montgomery, Prince George's and Charles counties -- keep on polluting. It's time the General Assembly used the power granted it under federal law and passed a four-pollutant bill. We need this legislation now -- for our air, for our climate and for our children.

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