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A lemon for New Hampshire

By Bill McKibben | March 26, 2009

IN AN EFFORT to meet clean-air laws, the Public Service Company of New Hampshire is busy trying to install an expensive scrubber on the smokestack of its Merrimack Station coal-fired power plant in Bow. A group of angry ratepayers is trying to slow it down. And here's the man-bites-dog thing, which makes this one of the more interesting ecological battles underway in the nation: The angry ratepayers are almost certainly the real defenders of the green.

Green as in the environment. But also green as in the stuff the ratepayers of the Granite State are likely to be taking out of their wallets in ever-larger amounts should the utility succeed in stifling any further review, and sticking the scrubbers up on top of the plant.

Under the Clean Air Act, power plants aren't supposed to spew mercury into the environment. That makes sense: Mercury from power plants is why New Hampshire anglers are only supposed to feed their kids 4 ounces a month of the fish they catch. For a long time, PSNH, like many utilities around the country, fended off the mandate to install scrubbers, but finally decided to go ahead and put on \$250 million worth of technology, a figure that as construction is about to begin has now almost doubled. It's a couple of decades late, but, hey, better late than never.

In the meantime, though, scientists - and environmentalists - have figured out a more important reason to worry about coal-fired power plants, and that's the carbon dioxide they spew into the atmosphere. This is what causes global warming, and the scrubbers PSNH is talking about will do nothing to remove it from the exhaust. Which is too bad, because if the scientists are right about climate change, soon New Hampshire anglers will be able to catch salt-water species in their own living rooms. That is, mercury is a problem, but carbon is a crisis.

In light of all the new data, it would make real sense to start talking about alternative sources of energy - to begin investigating how to dramatically reduce electric use, and find smaller, more localized sources of power. It makes environmental sense, but also economic sense, because almost everyone now realizes that pretty soon carbon will carry a price. President Obama has called for a bill to cap carbon, and once something like it passes, the cost of coal-fired power will begin an inexorable climb. And by the way, these approaches would eliminate all the mercury - not just the 80 percent the scrubbers will scrub.

So why spend \$450 million on new scrubbers if there's a reasonable chance you won't be able to keep the power plant running? Isn't it a little like buying pricey chrome rims for your car the week before inspection, when you're pretty sure the lack of brakes means you aren't going to pass? That's the question a group of big commercial ratepayers in the state are asking. They're led by Gary Hirshberg of Stonyfield Farms, Dean Kamen of Segway, the folks at Timberland - that is, the kind of businesses that have a real future in New Hampshire.

They haven't asked for much - just a 90-day pause while a series of analyses are undertaken to see if the scrubber plan really makes sense. But PSNH has responded with a series of roundhouse punches, claiming the delay will lead to job losses and great expense.

As to the prospect of Obama's carbon regulation, which would make their plant leak money, they have these reassuring words: "Speculation on future federal environmental costs for CO2 is just that - speculation."

Yeah, but even New Hampshire's GOP Senator Judd Gregg has backed carbon-cap regulation. It's not hard to see the writing on the wall. Heck, a few weeks ago congressional leaders began the process of converting their own coal-fired power plant, two blocks from Capitol Hill, over to natural gas - a tack that would be cheaper for Granite State residents as well.

After 40 years of service, the Bow plant represents the best of yesterday's technology. It's as outdated as a hulking old SUV. But the used-car salesmen at PSNH are determined to get it off the lot, so they're hard-selling the nifty new rustproofing. New Hampshire ratepayers better kick the tires a little harder, or they're going to get stuck with a lemon. A lemon with brand-new scrubbers, but still a lemon.

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