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Environmental Groups Challenge Ohio EPA on Clean Air Permit Issued to Tree-Burning Power Plant

Groups say permitting process was rushed and flawed

COLUMBUS, OHIO (Tuesday - February 1, 2011) – A coalition of environmental groups has appealed a recent controversial decision by the Ohio EPA to grant the Dayton Power & Light Company (“DP&L”) a Clean Air Act permit to burn trees, grasses, and other, unspecified “biomass” at the company’s Killen Station, a coal-fired power plant located in Adams County, Ohio. The environmental groups, the Ohio Environmental Council, the Buckeye Forest Council, and the Sierra Club – Ohio Chapter, filed their appeal on Thursday, January 27th, with the Ohio Environmental Review Appeals Commission.

The environmental groups are troubled by the timing of Ohio EPA’s decision and believe that its issuance of the final permit violates Ohio law and the federal Clean Air Act.

“There are some real concerns about whether the agency gave due consideration to some of the issues in this permit and to the public’s comments,” said Will Reisinger, staff attorney for the Ohio Environmental Council. “It appears that OEPA rushed the Killen application through the permitting process in order to help DP&L avoid new federal pollution standards,” Reisinger added.

The permit was subject to a public hearing in Manchester, Ohio on December 13th, with written comments accepted through December the 20th. Ohio EPA granted the final permit 9 days later, on December 29th, 2010, in the waning days of the Strickland administration.

“Interestingly, the State of Ohio implemented greenhouse gas pollution standards the very next day, on December 30th. This may have been the quickest turnaround on a permit that we have ever seen from OEPA,” added Reisinger.

The OEPA permit allows DP& to replace 5% of coal energy generation at the Killen facility with wood-cellulose pellets made from an undisclosed combination of wood, grasses, and “other” ingredients. DP&L is eligible to receive renewable energy credits or “RECs” for burning the wood pellets, which the company can then sell or use to meet its 12.5% renewable energy requirement under Ohio’s renewable energy standard, or “RES.”

“RESs appear to be the only real incentive behind the move on DP&L’s part,” said Nathan Johnson, an attorney for Buckeye Forest Council. “The switch to wood-cellulose will increase the emissions rates of several pollutants, increase fuel transportation costs, reduce plant efficiency, and potentially result in the clearing of thousands of acres of forestland.”

The groups also contend that the Killen permit application failed to disclose precisely what fuel the power plant will be burning. The DP&L application claims that the fuel at issue will consist of pellets made of wood, grass, and “other” biomass, but does not describe just how much of the pelleted fuel will be wood, grass, or “other,” respectively.

“DP&L provided no detail about the biomass material it will burn and, therefore, OEPA issued an air permit without any idea about how this modification will affect air quality,” said Reisinger. According to the environmental groups, Ohio EPA should have recognized that the Killen permit application was flawed and incomplete and should have either denied it or returned it to DP&L. “OEPA just handed DP&L a blank check to burn almost anything at the Killen plant,” said Reisinger.

The environmental groups are also concerned that the Killen permit will end up harming Ohio’s forests. The permit allows Killen Station to burn up to 185,000 tons of dried biomass pellets annually.

“One ton of pellets typically requires the drying of two tons of freshly cut, green wood, which means Killen could consume about 370,000 tons of green wood each year,” said Cheryl Johncox of Buckeye Forest Council. “This would take a significant bite out of the amount of wood Ohio’s forests grow each year,” added Johncox.

“Killen is only one of many biomass proposals in Ohio, and we strongly feel that allowing Killen to burn such large quantities of woody biomass may set a precedent of potentially clear-cutting Ohio’s forests,” said Jen Miller of the Sierra Club Ohio Chapter.

Although the groups contend that the permit application was incomplete and flawed, they do agree that it reveals some troubling pollution figures. Test burns conducted as part of the application process indicate that the fuel switch will increase several pollutants already released by the facility, including carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, lead, and the air toxics manganese, acetaldehyde, benzene, formaldehyde, and toluene.

Test results show that emissions of benzene, which cause cancer, developmental disabilities in children, and infertility, will increase by 450% due to the switch to 5% biomass heat input. Similarly, formaldehyde levels also are projected to increase by as much as 2,100%. Formaldehyde is known to cause cancer, and is suspected of being a neurotoxin.

Effects from carbon monoxide – another pollutant set to increase significantly – can include birth defects, low birth weight, biological dysfunctions, or psychological or behavioral deficits.

“There is a misnomer that biomass is clean, but it can increase carbon and particulate matter pollution. Not only is burning wood at Killen bad for Ohio forests, it’s bad for our health,” said Miller.

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