

EPA Denies Permit for Coal Plant Near Midewin

A three-year battle to protect [Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie](#) and air quality ended in victory on September 27, 2006, when the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Appeals Board](#) (EAB) remanded the permit for a 660-megawatt coal-fired power plant in Elwood. The plant, if built, would have been the largest new source of air pollution in Illinois in decades.

Activists were startled into action when the Illinois EPA broadcast news of the Indeck-Elwood, LLC draft permit (at 5:10 p.m. on a Friday) with a glaring omission—there was no mention of the adjacent 19,000-acre prairie preserve. Midewin harbors many rare species, including the federally endangered eastern prairie fringed orchid, leafy prairie clover, and Hine’s emerald dragonfly, as well as 348 species of native plants, more than 108 species of breeding birds, 27 species of mammals, 9 species of freshwater mussels, and 23 species of amphibians and reptiles.

At the sole public hearing, conservation advocates and neighbors voiced concern about a number of egregious problems with the proposed plant to an overflow crowd of about 300 people. The state rejected their assertions and issued an air permit to Indeck on October 10, 2003. A coalition of groups, including The American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago, Citizens Against Ruining the Environment, the Clean Air Task Force, Lake County Conservation Alliance, and the Sierra Club, immediately filed a petition for review by the EAB.

The coalition argued that the power plant would emit several pollutants that would harm Midewin’s high-quality, sensitive soils and vegetation. For example, hydrogen chloride, nitrogen oxide, and sulfur dioxide emissions are acidic and can decrease the pH of soil and water. “If the soil changes, there is an increased likelihood of driving out native species, allowing invasive species to move in,” notes Bruce Nilles, director of the Sierra Club’s Midwest Clean Energy Campaign. The IEPA also failed to consider the impact of chemicals in cooling tower mist likely to fall on rare plant communities. The Openlands Project filed a “friend-of-the-court” brief that underscored what was at stake with Midewin.

The City of Chicago, already out of compliance with EPA air quality standards, also filed a brief urging the state to consider cleaner technology. The plan for the proposed plant utilized outdated pollution controls, adding ozone to the air, “the effect of which is essentially a sunburn on your lungs,” Nilles noted. The Indeck plant would have emitted approximately 5 million tons of carbon dioxide, the primary cause of global warming, and more than 10,000 tons per year of air pollutants that can cause cancer, respiratory disease, neurological defects, and premature deaths.

Brian Urbaszewski, director of environmental health for the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago, describes the effect of coal-fired power plants as “garbage in, garbage out.” Energy efficiency initiatives and clean energy alternatives, such as wind and solar, can’t easily compete with coal plants that ratepayers have already paid for. Yet,

Urbaszewski explains, global warming is pushing us to account for the full cost of coal while wind power is getting less expensive to generate.

— Alison Carney Brown