

Fla. utilities dump coal-fired power plant

Gov. Charlie Crist says climate change played a role in plans.

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TALLAHASSEE - Under pressure from Gov. Charlie Crist, a consortium of Florida utilities pulled the plug Tuesday on another controversial coal-fired power plant because of concerns about global warming.

"It's like a new day is dawning for energy in Florida, " said Susan Glickman of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, which opposed the plant.

Crist announced the demise of the coal plant during a news conference unveiling the agenda of his global warming summit in Miami next week, where he promised to "identify specific actions" that Florida can take to combat climate change.

"Good things are happening, " Crist said. "That pleases me, and I think it pleases our fellow Floridians."

Last month the Public Service Commission short-circuited a proposal by Florida Power & Light to build a 960-megawatt coal-fired plant near Everglades National Park. The PSC based its vote in part on concerns about the cost of cleaning up the plant's greenhouse gas emissions.

Now the four utilities involved in building the 800-megawatt Taylor Energy Center in the state's Big Bend area have dropped their plans for that coal plant as well, saying they will "assess how best to meet their customers' electricity needs in ways consistent with growing concerns about greenhouse gas emissions."

Utilities officials took that step Tuesday after repeated meetings over the past six months with one of Crist's top aides, Chris Kise, who told them about the governor's concerns regarding greenhouse gas emissions from coal-burning plants.

"It's good to encourage good behavior, and I think they've done something very positive, " Crist said.

After Crist was sworn in as governor in January, he dispatched Kise, whose title is "counsellor to the governor, " to meet with FPL executives and the executive director of the consortium involved in the Taylor Energy Center. They talked about global warming.

"They got a sense of where the governor's leadership is on the environmental considerations," said Kise, a Miami native who served as solicitor general when Crist was attorney general.

The four utilities involved in the Taylor County plant were "very receptive to the governor's message about climate change," Kise said.

Taylor project spokesman Mark McCain said Kise didn't tell anyone what to do, but "we shared information about the project and how it compares with other options." As a result, he said, utilities officials realized that "climate change is becoming a major issue in Florida."

That point was driven home by last month's decision by the PSC to reject FPL's Glades Power Park plan. FPL officials had announced last September that they would build the plant on about 5,000 acres of Glades County farmland owned by Tampa-based Lykes Brothers. The location would have put the plant within 70 miles of Everglades National Park and 40 miles north of Big Cypress National Preserve.

Crist openly questioned the plant's location, the National Park Service raised concerns about air pollution and environmental groups argued it would increase greenhouse gases at a time when the nation is trying to combat global warming.

On June 5, PSC commissioners rejected the plant by a 4-0 vote, saying they worried that electric rates could grow much higher for the coal plant if Congress begins taxing carbon emissions as a way to reverse climate change.

The vote marked the first time global warming had ever played a role in a PSC decision, and the first time in 15 years the agency rejected a new power plant.

So this week the four utilities - Tallahassee, the Jacksonville Electric Authority, the Florida Municipal Power Agency and the Disney-based Reedy Creek Improvement District - agreed to stop seeking state permits to build the Taylor Energy Center plant near Perry.

"It's more important that we work with state leaders to craft an energy plan for Florida," Taylor Energy Center project manager Mike Lawson said in a news release, noting that he looked forward to attending the governor's summit.

The announcement marked a startling turnabout for Taylor County residents who opposed the plant. "I'm tickled!" said resident Joy Towles Ezell, who frequently referred to the plant as the "Taylor Emphysema Center."

The Taylor plant "was a 19th century solution to a 21st century problem," said Ross Burnaman, a Tallahassee lawyer who had sued to try to stop the plant.

"We've got to have power. We know that, " Crist said at his news conference. "But to continue to rely on foreign oil and coal, I don't think is in the best interests of our state."

Crist's anti-coal crusade isn't over. Last month his Department of Environmental Protection withdrew support for a permit for the Seminole Electric Co. to add onto a coal-burning plant in Putnam County.

Because the Putnam plant is an addition to an existing plant, environmental groups had not lined up against it as they did the Everglades and Taylor County plants. It seemed to face smooth sailing.

But now the DEP has raised a major hurdle, filing a legal motion that says the state needs to consider limiting the plant's greenhouse gases.

Meanwhile the agenda for next week's climate summit calls for discussions of clean energy sources.

The conference's cost, estimated at more than \$370, 000, is being covered by donations from environmental groups and business interests, according to Tom Linley of Volunteer Florida, the agency coordinating the funding. For instance, Walt Disney is giving \$10, 000; General Electric, \$20, 000; and Environmental Defense, \$95, 000. To environmental activists, it adds up to one thing: Crist is serious about global warming.

"The governor has made a fundamental decision that Florida needs to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, and he's taking a stand that he's not going to allow any new emission sources, " Glickman said. "It's the definition of leadership on this issue."

Fast Facts:

Summit agenda

www.myfloridaclimate.com/agenda

For a look at the agenda for Gov. Charlie Crist's global warming summit next week, click on: <http://www.myfloridaclimate.com/agenda>