

North Carolina residents need straight talk from Duke Energy

By Jim Warren, NC WARN

Climate change is causing extensive damage at an accelerating rate. Oxfam International reports that weather disasters have quadrupled in 20 years with a quarter billion people impacted annually. Arctic Sea ice could be gone by summer 2012, further disrupting weather systems. And the world's top scientists recently amplified their call for urgent reduction of greenhouse gases.

Yet, Duke Energy is beginning construction of a large coal-fired power plant near Charlotte using crafty public relations to imply the new Cliffside plant will be "good for the environment."

With its Jan. 29 approval of the plant, Gov. Mike Easley's administration joined Duke's PR campaign. The trick: Masking the new unit's pollution behind upgrades already required by state law at an existing Cliffside furnace.

Also central to the ruse is the assertion that the new unit would be cleaner than the four older ones to be retired. But those four furnaces combined are less than one-quarter the size of the new 800 megawatt unit, and they sit idle most of the time.

Following state approval, the deception increased as Duke ran an open letter from CEO Jim Rogers in full-page ads across its service area. Included are nine references to "global warming" and related terms, plus a statement that Cliffside will "eliminate 90 percent of regulated emissions." Since no other pollutant is mentioned, readers are led to believe the reduction refers to greenhouse gases.

In truth, the new unit would discharge 6 million tons of uncontrolled carbon dioxide each year. That's more than 12 times more than the small units to be retired, along with 10 times more mercury and 13 to 50-fold increases of other toxic metals such as arsenic.

Cliffside could fail before completion, as did six nuclear plants Duke tried to build in the 1980s. The project is particularly risky for stockholders and electricity customers due to an unstable energy market and global economy. Cliffside's cost estimate has already doubled to \$2.4 billion dollars. Upcoming carbon regulation will drive power bills even higher, and Wall Street is reacting by tightening financing of coal-fired power. (Rogers supports carbon regulation for others, but is lobbying for Cliffside to be exempted.)

Dozens of U.S. coal-power projects have been cancelled and are being offset by efficient, renewable energy alternatives that are proving highly successful in the free marketplace, even as coal and nuclear rely on billions in public subsidies.

The state doesn't need more electricity generation. We need to stop wasting half of what is produced, as we belatedly must do with water. A 2007 state study confirmed we can easily save enough energy to offset growing demand, while expanding renewables and creating tens of

thousands of jobs. For far less than Cliffside's price tag, solar water heating could be added to every home in the region, nullifying the need for new plants.

Duke CEO Rogers talks about energy efficiency. But his long-delayed efficiency proposal seems designed for Duke to make exorbitant profit from modest programs, limit widespread energy efficiency, and provide PR cover to build coal and nuclear plants.

As the nation's foremost climate expert, NASA's James Hansen, emphasizes: The best thing North Carolina can do to tackle accelerating climate change is to cancel this veritable global warming machine. We must do our part here, so the U.S. can help developing countries avoid repeating our mistakes.

Recognizing the gravity of climate change, a statewide coalition of nonprofits cannot afford to rest until Cliffside is stopped. We don't have time to wait for Duke's vague promise to become carbon neutral in a decade or so, because the new plant alone would offset most statewide efforts to reduce CO2.

People across North Carolina must continue calling on CEO Jim Rogers to be straight with the public, and walk his green talk by cancelling this unnecessary plant. And we must demand that our leaders stand up to the giant power companies that have long used their financial influence and deceptive propaganda to stifle democratic decision-making.

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