

Arizona: energy farm of the future?

By *desierto*, Created 05/27/2010 - 10:34

Submitted by *desierto* on Thu, 05/27/2010 - 10:34

by *AZ IMC / Sonya A. Diehn* Sunday, Jan. 27, 2002 at 4:55 AM

Thirty-four new power plants are proposed to be built in the state of Arizona by the year 2007. Fifteen new plants have already been approved since the Bush/Cheney oil administration took power last January. Limited Liability Corporations (LLCs) are springing up across Arizona to reap the lucrative rewards of energy speculation in a state controlled by political conservatives. The Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC), comprised of three elected officials, must vote to approve or not approve the incorporation status of these LLCs. On Thursday January 24th, the ACC convened to hear arguments for and against the proposed Toltec natural gas plant, to be located in a valley between Picacho Peak State Park and the new Clinton-designated Ironwood Forest National Monument. This valley is used extensively for agricultural purposes, and lies about 20 miles South of the town of Casa Grande, between Phoenix and Tucson in Southern Arizona.

ACC commissioners William Mundell and Marc Spitzer, who ran as Clean Election candidates, will vote on this issue Tuesday, January 30th, along with another commissioner who was not present at this hearing. Approximately twenty people spoke at the hearing last Thursday, and of these, only a few were in favor of the plant.

The ACC called the Sheriff of Pinal County to speak first. He said the Sheriffs Department would happily welcome the plant and the new crime it would generate. Later in the hearing, it was disclosed that the Sheriffs department had received a \$100,000 donation from the LLC-to-be. Another speaker, with the School Board, also made a welcoming statement to the plant; Toltec LLC gave the Eloy Elementary School District and the Toltec Elementary School District a donation of an undisclosed amount as well. These speakers trumpeted the benefit this plant will bring to the community in the form of jobs: neighboring Eloy has a current unemployment rate of 13%. Through the course of the hearing, the numbers were brought to light: the proposed power plant may offer a maximum of 60 jobs, most of which would go to specialists likely not to be from the area. One speaker commented, "I'm sure the one or two janitors Toltec LLC hires from Eloy will be very grateful for the work they've provided."

Lisa Shumaker, the wife of Jon Shumaker (an intervener in this case), slammed the ACC for the difficulty of the process a citizen has to go through to be involved. She and her husband had spent thousands of dollars and weeks of their vacation time in opposing this proposed plant. She also spoke about the difficult scheduling and format of the public input sessions, such as this hearing, which were usually held during the day in the middle of the week. The many poor and under-educated residents of Casa Grande surely had very little opportunity to participate in this process, if they were even aware of it, given that one announcement in the local paper and one in the Phoenix paper were the only public notice.

The use of water and issue of subsidence came up repeatedly as concerns for residents, farmers, and local politicians. The proposed Toltec plant would use an estimated 9,500 acre-feet of water to cool steam-producing components of the plant, enough to sustain the entire town of Casa Grande (population 26,000) for a year. This water would be pumped from the aquifer. Any water

pumped from Arizona aquifers is essentially fossil water and once gone, is gone forever. Thus, water is actually one of Arizona's most precious resources. Subsidence, or the compaction of soils resulting from aquifer depletion, has a huge effect on existing structures, roads, farmland, and the shape of the floodplain. The proposed Toltec plant claims to mitigate their groundwater usage through the purchase of Central Arizona Project (CAP) water, which is taken from the Colorado River via a canal system hundreds of miles long. In the Certificate of Environmental Compatibility already granted to the project, Toltec Power LLC proposed to purchase \$100,000 worth of CAP water yearly; although in a few decades after the price of water has increased, this will not amount to much. In addition, any proposed recharge will not raise the ground level after subsidence compaction, which may go down four feet or more. Daniel Preston of the Tohono O Odham Nation spoke with concern for the water rights of Native American tribes, as well as concern for ancient Hohokam archeological sites which were not given due consideration in Toltec LLCs proposal.

The proposed plant would be built in a valley between the two designated scenic preserves of the Picacho Peak State Park and the Ironwood Forest National Monument. In this area, typical of Sonoran desert basin and range topography, 160-foot smokestacks and the development of roads and other infrastructure would mar the "viewshed" for nearly a hundred miles in each direction. A person looking from the top of Picacho peak, or from Ragged Top in the Ironwood Monument, would see the scar of the plant upon the land as it stands out in this open valley. The Ironwood Forest National Monument, along with the Sonoran Desert National Park in Southwestern Arizona, were designated by Bill Clinton in his controversial final spurt of monument designations. Ironwood Monument has already undergone several tests in its protection, from Asarco mining corporation proposing an uneven land exchange, to the continued livestock grazing and off-road vehicle use that occurs there. Governor Hull has already attempted, with Gale Norton, to undo designation for the Ironwood Monument and the Sonoran Desert National Park, or at least make this designation meaningless by allowing such impacts as power lines to exist within them. Arizona seems to many as expansive and uninhabited land, but there are very few truly wild places left here. With a growing population, land too is a finite resource in Arizona. One speaker painted a picture of a future where the desert is criss-crossed with power lines and roads, filled with haze from pollution, and all the water is gone. Needless to say, this is not a happy scenario to leave for future generations.

The question of need was also a big issue. There is no need for this power in Arizona, which is currently in a state of power surplus. The philosophy of the Toltec LLC seems to be, generate the power and sell it on the market wherever that market may be. As the fallout from deregulation hits the fan in California and nationally with the Enron scandal, citizens are wary of such a free-market approach. Hackles rise whenever mention is made of selling power produced here for markets in California, or god forbid, Mexico. The proposed and also massively unpopular Tucson Electric Power high-voltage transmission line would run from Sahuarita through a roadless area to a switching station in Mexico, which will buy and sell power across the border freely. Numerous coal-fired plants are in the works in Mexico, where lax environmental laws will allow such polluting development. Thus, power will flow both ways in this free-trade model, which will surely increase the buildup of the maquila industry, and militarization/wall development along the border. Currently, no contract exists for the power that will be generated here, and there is no standard set forth for the export of power. The point was made, that Toltec LLC desiring to build a plant should does not in fact establish NEED.

Another theme that kept emerging, was that of the antiquated model of fossil fuel development. "Dependance upon foreign oil and fossil fuels is the past. We are standing on the brink of a new future," said one speaker. With such abundant sunshine in Arizona, energy development should

focus on this clean, renewable source of power. "Lets not choke on another Enron pretzel," said a different speaker, referring to the Bush administrations shameless collusion with fossil fuel industries. A solar field of a dozen square miles would generate enough energy for the entire state, so why are we wasting our time building natural gas plants? The answer to this lies in both the existing energy cartel, as well as a lack of progressive leadership on a local or state level to make this happen. Citizens, too, must make a paradigm shift to conservation and sustainability before this is likely.



[1]**AZ Powerlines**One anti-environmental speaker made the statement that "illegals throwing trash" was a bigger problem than the proposed plant, although from a rational standpoint, litter from migrants pales in comparison to the impact from power plants; not to mention off-road vehicle use, mining, grazing, and development. Another speaker, from a subdivision near the plant, unexpectedly spoke in favor of it, although it emerged that the only reason for this was a desire to pave the road to his gated community. He claimed to be a proponent of wildlife and that he sees things far worse than power plants occurring in the desert, although he didnt seem to consider how the subdivision he lives in relates. He also asked the ACC to build a Walmart nearby.

In a recent landmark decision, the ACC turned down a proposed plant near Wickiup, AZ which would have greatly impacted riparian areas along the Big Sandy River. This future-oriented decision was the first time plant has ever been turned down for environmental reasons in Arizona. Mundell, Spitzer, and the resdtt of the ACC have the opportunity to make another positive decision to vote against incorporation for Toltec LLC, and preserve the water and viewsheds of Arizona. They should listen to the voice of reason, and of the people, instead of the voice of speculative investment. By not allowing this plant to be built, they are investing in the future of Arizona, not as an energy farm but as a place for humans to live sustainably with the natural environment.

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