
Talks focus on emissions from Mexican power plants

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Imperial County leaders and others this week urged the U.S. government to set a bold precedent that will prevent Mexican power plants from harming the air and water quality and public health of U.S. border communities.

In response to a San Diego federal court ruling in May, the U.S. Department of Energy and the Bureau of Land Management held hearings in El Centro and Calexico Thursday as part of an environmental assessment of two Mexicali power plants and the transmission lines built to carry electricity to California homes and businesses.

Although the plants and lines are already operating, the court ordered a new environmental analysis. The hearings were held to determine what issues the new assessment should cover. Many of the scores who spoke said the government's earlier assessment had ignored the effect the power plants – located three miles from the border in Mexico – would have on the Imperial Valley. Developers Sempra Energy and InterGen are based in the United States, they noted, and most of the electricity will be sold to U.S. consumers.

"It is not the purpose of the people of Imperial County to deny urgently needed power supplies to the rest of California," Imperial County Supervisor Hank Kuiper said. "It is, however, our intention to protect the health and environment of this very poor and largely minority population."

"You have a responsibility to be accountable to your citizens," said Carlos Yruretagoyena, a Mexican appointee to the binational Border Environment Cooperation Commission, even though Mexico is allowing foreign companies to skirt control and mitigation measures that would be required if the projects were built in the United States or California.

Numerous people urged the officials to require mitigation measures that would offset the emissions that are being added to the region's already highly polluted skies. Such measures might involve trading so-called air credits, they said, by paving roads or retiring older cars in Mexicali. Several said that using that city's wastewater to cool the plants is having harmful effects on the New River and Salton Sea. Instead of this wet-cooling system, they suggested a dry-cooling system using air or a combination of the two.

Such measures would set an important precedent for any future plants built in Mexico to provide power to the United States.

As many as 20 similar power projects have been slated for the U.S.-Mexico border, and there are concerns Sempra and InterGen plan additional plants in Baja California.

But Sempra spokesman Art Larson said most, if not all, of the 20 other projects have fallen through and that Sempra has no new power plants in the works, except for its Palomar project near Escondido.

"I don't know of any plans of an additional power plant," he said. "There's nothing in the regulatory arena."

Numerous speakers offered emotional comments on the cross-border region's already highly polluted atmosphere and the impact it is having on Imperial County residents, especially children and the elderly.

County Supervisor Joe Maruca, a 35-year school administrator, spoke of the many students who store asthma equipment and medications in their lockers. Several said their own children are afflicted with breathing difficulties.

"I don't know how much more of this we can take," said Aida Gates of El Centro. "It's one more drop added to a quickly filling glass of pollutants."

Rudy Maldonado, an Imperial Irrigation District director, said a worsening situation will impact the region's economic expansion.

"We will not build. We will not prosper," he said. "We will be stymied if we don't have a way to trade these air credits."

Maldonado, who also chairs the New River Wetlands Project, a program that uses wetlands to reduce pollutants in the New River and Salton Sea, said the power plants' wastewater cooling systems have decreased the amount of water flowing across the border.

"The drop already is 1 foot to 2.5 feet," he said. "What we had today was like sludge." That raises the risk that toxins could affect local residents, Maldonado said. "What are we waiting for, an epidemic to infect the city of Calexico?"

Bill Powers, an environmental engineer who as an organizer of the Border Power Plant Working Group filed the lawsuit that led to the U.S. government's reassessment, suggested numerous criteria by which the Department of Energy should judge the plants' effect on air and water. "We will be looking closely at the analysis," he said.

Anthony Como, the Energy Department official who conducted the hearings, said members of the public have until Dec. 1 to submit comments. They can be sent by electronic mail to Ellen.Russell@hq.doe.gov.

The agency plans to finish a draft environmental impact statement by early 2004, and the public will have another opportunity for comment then. The final impact study is expected to be issued before May 15, 2004, and a final decision on a permit to operate the transmission lines should follow shortly thereafter.

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