

The Charlotte Observer

For the Record

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We must get on with moving to a cleaner energy economy **Duke's Cliffside coal plant a bad move for environment and economy**

From June Blotnick, executive director of the Carolinas Clean Air Coalition:

The Charlotte Chamber's Bob Morgan recently stated, "Environmentalists are right: It's time for action". Those of us working against Duke's Cliffside coal-burning power plant welcome those words. Unfortunately, we differ on what specific actions are needed and the timetable for taking action.

We and many business organizations believe that energy efficiency is not the fifth fuel as both Mr. Morgan and Duke's Mr. Rogers say - it's the first fuel! Energy efficiency and conservation are the fastest, healthiest, cheapest ways to transform our energy economy. Energy efficiency costs barely a fifth as much as nuclear energy and less than half as much as coal. Investing in energy efficiency makes good business sense. It reduces costs and creates green jobs.

Unfortunately Duke's Save-a-Watt program would accomplish too little and costs too much. Even the N.C. Utilities Commission sent Duke back to the drawing board to develop a fairer way to charge customers for efficiency.

Duke would not be building Cliffside if shareholders were bearing all the financial risk. Our legislature gave Duke permission to charge its customers even if the plant is never finished or has to be shut down early. Ratepayers are taking most of the risk for the \$2.4 billion plant.

Todd Stern, special envoy for climate change at the U.S. State Department, said in The Financial Times: "How good will the business judgment of companies that make high-carbon choices now look in five, 10, 20 years, when it becomes clear that heavily polluting infrastructure has become deadly and must be phased out before the end of its useful life?" He reflected that high-carbon goods and services will become untenable as the world negotiated a new agreement to cut carbon emissions.

There's much evidence that we can move rapidly away from huge power plants and to energy efficiency and renewables. John Blackburn, a Duke University professor emeritus of economics, provides a glimpse. Blackburn uses the utilities' own data to show that with modest changes in energy efficiency and cogeneration, along with installation of renewable energy generation already required by state law, North Carolina can avoid the need for any new plants and retire seven to nine coal-fired units. He also notes that ratepayers are likely to see their electric bills go up by 50 to 100 percent if we follow Duke's plan to build Cliffside and nuclear plants.

Jon Wellinghoff, chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, recently said "we may not need any" new coal plants - "ever". Interior Secretary Ken Salazar concurred saying "the idea that wind energy can replace most of our coal burning capacity today is a very real possibility." Investing in Cliffside is not the right business decision for North Carolina's economy. A healthy economy is dependent on adequate supplies of clean air and clean water - both diminished in our region due to our reliance on large air polluting and water-consuming power plants. Our region's leaders need to look beyond Duke's rhetoric and recognize the economic opportunities that can be quickly realized if we build our energy future on low-carbon, sustainable sources that are abundant in our state.