

Virginia utilities face crackdown

Bill would tighten air pollution standards on coal-burning plants

By CHRIS NEWMAN

cnewman@potomacnews.com

Virginia lawmakers are considering legislation that would dramatically cut pollution from the state's older coal-fired power plants, including one in Alexandria that emitted double its allowable tonnage last summer.

The Virginia Clean Smokestacks bill introduced last week targets emissions that cause smog and acid rain but goes beyond current federal regulations to limit mercury vapors, which studies are linking to infertility and other health problems.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has given the Washington, D.C., region a severe "non-attainment" air quality status and by 2005 the region must lower its emissions or risk losing federal transportation dollars.

The EPA has been ratcheting up air quality rules over the last several years, pushed by lawsuits and the realization by local, state and federal governments that to achieve cleaner air, older plants grandfathered under the 1977 Clean Air Act but expected to eventually shut down should install expensive smokestack scrubbers and filtering devices.

The Virginia legislation is modeled after North Carolina's Clean Smokestacks law passed two years ago that cleaned up 14 of the state's largest coal-fired plants at a cost of \$2 billion.

The way it works: The electric utilities are allowed to recover costs by freezing or increasing rates. In North Carolina, it took two years of negotiations before its biggest power utilities, Duke Power

Co. and Progress Energy Co., agreed to the arrangement. Their customers saw an average of an extra \$1 on their monthly electricity bills.

The Virginia legislation targets eight plants so the cost would be much less to Virginia customers, said bill sponsor Henrico Delegate John S. "Jack" Reid, R-72nd District.

"The public is already paying with health costs, with decreased tourism, and with environmental degradation," said Michael Town, director of the Sierra Club Virginia Chapter.

The Shenandoah National Park is the second most polluted national park, he said.

Coal-fired emissions are estimated to cause 1,000 deaths; 28,000 asthma attacks; and 246,000 lost days of work each year in Virginia, said Peter L. deFur, government relations chairman for the Lung Association of Virginia.

Reid, a senior Republican in the House, is not known for



SMOKESTACK

Continued from Page A1

environmental causes but he said two years ago his wife was diagnosed with a genetic lung disease, which is not caused by pollution but exacerbated by it.

"Seeing how much difference certain days have on what she can do. I mean, literally some days she can go out, do things, go all day, other times, middle of the day, she's out of it just because of air quality," he said.

His bill would reduce sulfur dioxide emissions by 88 percent and nitrogen oxide emissions by 75 percent by 2015. It will require mercury vapor emissions be reduced by 90 percent by 2008.

Five of the plants are owned by Dominion Virginia Power, two are in southwest Virginia owned by American Electric Power Co., and the Alexandria plant is owned by Mirant Corp.

Reid has met twice with Dominion officials and said they appear open to the proposal.

"The bill is still in its infancy and we're still in the process of reviewing it," said Dominion spokesman David Botkins.

Reid got 12 co-patrons signed up to the bill in just an afternoon, but he said he is not sure how the legislature will react.

Last April, Dominion agreed to a record \$1.2 billion settlement with the EPA for alleged violations of federal rules for upgrading older plants.

The settlement reduces emissions by Dominion plants in five states. Reid said he does not know yet how reductions in his bill compare to those in the settlement.

The Possum Point power plant in southeast Prince William was part of the settlement - Dominion converted it from coal to natural gas and oil. The project was completed last summer and reduced

smog-causing emissions by 82 to 92 percent, Dominion said.

By contrast, Mirant's Potomac River Plant in Alexandria exceeded its 1,019-ton limit for nitrogen oxides emissions by 1,120 tons in last summer's ozone season from May 1 to Sept. 30.

Mirant has taken no steps to meet the limits this summer, according to an EPA notice of violation filed Thursday.

Mirant has been working in good faith to negotiate a settlement with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, said August Wallmeyer, lobbyist for the Virginia Energy Providers Association.

A point of contention is whether the Mirant plan will be allowed to buy emissions credits from other states, an option federal rules allow beginning this summer, said Mike Dowd, air enforcement manager for the Virginia DEQ.

He said his agency wants to eliminate that ability to trade because the region has severe air quality status. Also, the allowance does not create a level playing field because Dominion cleaned its plants, he said.

"For our purposes as a region we really need the actual reductions," said Joan Rohlf, chief of air quality planning for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments.

The region's vehicle emissions account for most of its nitrogen oxide pollution at 290 tons per day during the summer, according to 2002 data.

Power plants generated 181 tons per day in 2002.

The Mirant plant's exceedance translated to around 6 tons a day during the summer, which is not allowed in the region's air quality plan, she said.

"It is concern that Mirant has exceeded its limit ... We've done the modeling, we know what we have to get down to by 2005," she said.

Staff writer Chris Newman can be reached at (804) 649-8710.

See SMOKESTACK, Page A2