

Comment period extended for Avenal plant

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Aug. 19, 2010 (2:22 p.m.)

Valley air officials have extended a public comment period for the proposal Avenal power plant, responding to a complaint that the public notice was inadequate.

The period was scheduled to close this coming Tuesday. The new deadline is Sept. 13.

After already securing a permit from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, the company working on the project is seeking a new permit that would for a revised design that lowers the bar of emissions from the power plant. The district has issued a preliminary determination of compliance in late July, triggering the public comment period.

See Friday's (afternoon) Sentinel for more details.

Public comment deadline fast approaching on Avenal power plant

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Thursday, Aug. 19, 2010 (11:43 a.m.)_

A regional air regulator says the proposed Avenal Power Plant, if built according to newly submitted plans, would be the cleanest natural gas power plant in the whole San Joaquin Valley.

But activists are not impressed. The cleanest power plant is still the one not built, they say.

Avenal Power Center LLC - a subsidiary of an Australian-owned investment bank, Macquarie Group Limited - is seeking a new permit from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to voluntarily lower the bar of emissions from its proposed power plant in a remote part of Kings County.

Specifically, the company is proposing to limit the annual facility-wide nitrogen oxide emissions from 288,618 pounds a year to 198,840 pounds a year, and the carbon monoxide emissions from 1.2 million pounds a year to 197,928 pounds a year.

Documents related to the revision and a preliminary determination of compliance are currently under public review, which closes Tuesday.

"[Should] the facility operate to its full permitted extent, it will have the lowest annual average permitted emissions of (nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide) of any natural gas-fired power plant known to the District," the documents state.

But the air district's public notification process - or lack thereof - has been called into question by an environmental justice group, Greenaction, which represents concerned citizens from the area.

"We're going to question the legitimacy of any notice or comment period where the affected community has already expressed repeated concerns about the specific project," said Bradley Angel, executive director of Greenaction. "Kettleman and Avenal residents, Greenaction and many others around the Valley have expressed concerns and opposition to the power plant in meetings and in written communication for a year now."

Angel said the district never notified his group nor residents directly about the latest public comment period on the project. The group is now demanding proper public notice and a new comment period.

Such are the latest developments in the proposed power plant project as well as rising opposition against the plan.

Avenal Power Center wants to build a 600-megawatt natural gas-fired combined cycle power plant within the Avenal city limits, about 6 miles from the town's residential area. The project would generate enough electricity to power 450,000 homes and small businesses.

First proposed in 2008, the project had key approval from the California Energy Commission last December.

The project, however, is under close scrutiny by the community and activists because of its proximity to Kettleman City, where a rash of birth defects have caused much controversy and raised questions about the cumulative impact of industrial projects surrounding the area. Kettleman activists are opposing the power plant project.

Meanwhile, another permit decision is pending from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the leadership of which promised more efforts to prevent further impact on public health in the Kettleman City area.

After a year of waiting, the company is suing the agency in a federal district court in Washington, D.C., seeking a court order compelling a permit decision, said Frank Wilson, spokesman for Avenal Power Center.

"It's not an unusual thing. The EPA is burdened with permits. They are very slow to issue anything," Wilson said.

The appeal to the court was filed in the spring. Wilson did not know when a court ruling is expected to be issued but remained optimistic.

"We're waiting for some determination by the district court," Wilson said. "We're hopeful that we will get that permit and begin construction sometime in the first quarter of next year."

The proposed power plant would be built on 25 acres of a 148-acre site that is just south of the Fresno County line and about 2 miles from Interstate 5, according to the California Energy Commission. The plant would be air cooled to minimize water use, and no waste water would leave the facility because it would recycle water through the use of a zero liquid discharge system, the commission says.

The cleanest power plant doesn't mean no pollution, Angel argues.

"Even if it's the cleanest 600-megawatt fossil fuel power plant they've ever permitted, that doesn't mean it's clean," Angel said. "Fossil fuel emits a wide range of pollutants, and the 600-megawatt plant is enormous. It will emit particulates, other pollutants and climate-change pollutants."

"The air quality of Kings County and the Valley is miserable. We have babies dying and getting sick in Kettleman City of some sort of pollution. The last thing we need is a new pollution source," Angel said.

Oh the Web

A public notice and a 229-page document regarding the Avenal Power Plant project can be viewed online at www.valleyair.org/notices/public_notices_idx.htm

Comments should be directed to David Warner, director of permit services, San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District, 1990 E. Gettysburg Ave., Fresno, CA 93726.