

Largest US public utility switching from coal to gas, despite proposed EPA carbon pollution limits

May 12 2023, by Travis Loller

The nation's largest public utility released plans Friday to build a new natural gas plant in Tennessee, largely dismissing renewable energy alternatives one day after the Biden administration proposed strict new limits on greenhouse gas emissions from power plants.

The Tennessee Valley Authority is replacing its coal-burning Kingston Fossil Plant, the site of a massive coal ash spill in 2008.

TVA's draft environmental impact statement says constructing a 1500-megawatt gas plant along with 3-4 megawatts of solar and 100 megawatts of battery storage at the Kingston site is "the best overall solution to provide low-cost, reliable energy to the TVA power system."

TVA considered replacing the Kingston plant with 1500 megawatts of solar and 2,200 megawatts of battery storage at various locations around the Tennessee Valley, but nixed solar as less reliable and spent only a few pages on the analysis.

The Southern Environmental Law Center criticized TVA's plan as one that "will handcuff customers to paying expensive fossil fuel prices for decades, even as the price of clean energy continues to fall." The group's statement Friday pointed out that TVA gas units built as recently as 2012 failed during a deep freeze over the Christmas holiday weekend last year, causing rolling blackouts across the region.

The nonprofit has long advocated for TVA to embrace non-carbon-emitting alternatives, mixing solar and [wind power](#) with projects that reduce the need for more electricity, like energy efficiency and demand-response technology that helps change consumption patterns to flatten peak demand periods.

TVA CEO Jeff Lyash has said repeatedly that gas is needed because it can provide power at any time, regardless of whether the sun is shining or the wind is blowing. The draft environmental impact statement estimates the new gas plant would produce 1.75 million tons of greenhouse gases a year. That's a big reduction from the current emissions, but the solar alternative would produce none.

TVA isn't writing off the possibility of more solar, however. It says the new gas plants will provide the flexibility needed to add 10,000 megawatts of solar to its overall system by 2035 and still meet peak demand periods.

TVA provides power to 10 million people across seven Southern states.

Kingston is not the only new gas plant the utility has in the works. The Southern Environmental Law Center is suing to block a gas-burning plant at the retired coal-burning Johnsonville Fossil Plant, claiming TVA violated federal law last year by failing to properly assess the environmental and climate impacts. TVA has declined to comment on the case.

Earlier this year, TVA announced a decision to replace its coal-burning Cumberland Fossil Plant with gas, despite concerns raised by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that the utility's analysis of alternatives was faulty and that the project is at odds with President Biden's clean energy goals.

Biden has called for a carbon-pollution-free energy sector by 2035. That's a goal TVA has said it can't achieve without technological breakthroughs in nuclear generation and [energy](#) storage. TVA has a goal of 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2035 over 2005 levels and net-zero emissions by 2050.

The EPA's new rule would require any new [power plants](#), and many existing ones, to cut or capture nearly all their carbon dioxide emissions in the coming years. TVA released a statement saying it "will continue to evaluate these rules and potential impacts to our system."

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