Reid wants closure of coal power plant near Vegas

KEN RITTER - Associated Press - Associated Press

U.S. Sen. Harry Reid on Tuesday called for the closure of a coal-fired power plant outside Las Vegas, saying he expects opposition from NV Energy Inc. but the facility is antiquated and a health risk to American Indians who live nearby.

"There is no clean coal," the Senate Democratic leader declared after meeting with several members of the Moapa Band of Paiutes who live near the Reid Gardner station and a handful of representatives of the Sierra Club and Nevada Conservation League who want the plant to close.

"We have to stop further degradation of the land and air as a result of burning coal," Reid said. "The solution is to close the plant. We want the boilers shut off."

Reid said during his National Clean Energy Summit 5.0 at the Bellagio resort that he expects NV Energy, Nevada's dominant electric utility, to fight to keep the 557-megawatt plant running. The plant's first two units started operations in the 1960s, and the third started in the 70s.

NV Energy spokeswoman Jennifer Schuricht released a statement calling the plant 55 miles north of Las Vegas a key component of a diverse group of generating plants "that make sense for our customers and ensure reliability and price stability."

NV Energy also generates electricity from seven natural gas-fired plants, 44 renewable projects and one other coal-fired plant near Battle Mountain in northern Nevada.

The publicly traded company said the Reid Gardner facility provides enough electricity to power 335,000 Nevada households, and the company exceeds state requirements for use of electricity produced by renewable energy sources including solar, wind and geothermal sources.

But the plant will lose a customer next year when the California Department of Water Resources ends a part-ownership contract and quits buying power from Reid Gardner.

The Nevada Public Utilities Commission is reviewing the plant's lifespan plan, and the federal Environmental Protection Agency is also considering modifications to its regional particulate emissions rules.

"We operate the Reid Gardner Generating Station in the best interests of our customers, in compliance with all federal and state laws, and in an environmentally responsible manner," the company statement said.

The plant is named for a former energy company employee not related to the senator.

Reid said he believes that despite technological upgrades by the company, the plant pollutes the air, and runoff from coal ash fouls water in the nearby Muddy River, which flows to the Colorado River and the Lake Mead reservoir behind Hoover Dam.

Moapa Paiute Tribal Chairman William Anderson said members of the 320-person tribe and their families complain of respiratory and health problems.

"People more and more are dying every other month," he said. "We have to do something about it."

Local, state and federal health agencies haven't verified the tribe's complaints because sample sizes of health studies are small.

Reid said he expected NV Energy would warn of rate increases if the plant closes.

"There will be a hue and cry," he predicted. "'You can't do that.' 'It will increase your power bill.'"

"But it won't," he said. "They know that."

Bill Corcoran, regional director of the Sierra Club's "Beyond Coal" campaign, told reporters his organization recently submitted to the Nevada Plant a report that found closing the plant would save $59 million for the company and its ratepayers.

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