Environmentalists Pan Kansas Coal Plant Provision

JOHN MILBURN, Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Opponents of a coal-fired power plant planned for southwest Kansas said Tuesday that developers of the nearly decade-old project still face obstacles in completing the work despite legislation approved by the U.S. House.

Kansas congressman Tim Huelskamp inserted language removing one level of federal oversight of the project planned by Sunflower Electric Power Corp. The Hays-based company wants to build a second coal-fired unit at its Holcomb power plant. Huelskamp, a Republican, represents the area where the plant would be built and has long supported its construction dating to his term in the Kansas Legislature.

"I think it's still really wishful thinking that the project will happen," said Amanda Goodin, senior associate attorney with the environmental group Earthjustice. "There's no place for the power to go. It seems more than a little foolish to invest $2 to $3 billion in this power when you don't have a buyer."

Three-fourths of the energy generated by the second unit, enough by some estimates to power more than 400,000 homes, would be reserved for Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, of Westminster, Colo. Tri-State is a wholesale supplier that is owned by 44 cooperatives throughout a 200,000-square-mile service territory across Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico and Wyoming.

Goodin said the project still faces other obstacles from Kansas courts and the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as new renewable energy standards imposed by Colorado on Tri-State.

Huelskamp inserted the provision, which has not been approved by the Senate, in the House version of the farm bill. He said Congress was moving closer to approving his efforts help Sunflower and other rural electric cooperatives from excessive federal regulation.

"The privately-funded Holcomb project will help meet the energy needs of Kansans, reduce the danger of 'brown outs,' and bring $2 billion in economic activity to the region," Huelskamp said in a statement. "It is a shame that environmental groups and regulatory excess continue to stand in the way of affordable electricity for rural America."

Cindy Hertel, spokeswoman for Sunflower, said the provisions won't make it easy to build the new power plant, but it affirms existing federal procedures in place for decades on rural projects that do not involve federal funding, which is the case with Holcomb.

"The provision in the farm bill would enable Rural Utility Service to process routine requests in a reasonable amount of time, thus enabling electric cooperatives all over the country to continue to serve their members with reliable energy at the most affordable cost," Hertel said.

The 895-megawatt generating station near Holcomb hit its first wall in 2007, when then-Gov. Kathleen Sebelius withheld a permit sought by Sunflower Electric Power Corp. because of the plant's potential environmental impact. Republican lawmakers who supported the plant passed four bills in 2008 and 2009 aimed at pushing the project forward, but Sebelius vetoed all of them.

The project was cleared at the state level after a deal was brokered by Gov. Mark Parkinson, Sebelius' replacement, which allowed Sunflower to construct the plant in exchange for expanding wind farms and establishing renewable energy standards in Kansas.

Bill Griffith with the Kansas chapter of the Sierra Club said the fight over the Holcomb plant was something to take serious as it goes to the Senate, but not one he felt would move the project forward anytime soon.

"They are really pushing a large stone uphill," he said,

Griffith said the ongoing court and regulatory fight was a "cultural battle" between those who cling to coal as a power source and environmentalist concerned about the impact on the climate.

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