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LETTER: GRP is an environmental disaster

Oct 24, 2019

Dear Editor: I have a farm in Madison County near the “power plant.” Upon learning about the plant, I was excited that waste from timber operations and other clean wood could be used for energy recovery. Having dealt with highly acidic soil like many in the south, I was also excited that the waste wood ash could feasibly be used to raise soil PH at a cheaper price than lime for farmers. However, all my excitement died the day I drove down Hwy. 72 and saw massive numbers of crossties being loaded off a rail at the plant. Why? I accidentally caught several ties on fire last year doing a prescribed burn – ties CSX had put on my property obscured by brush. It was the most toxic burning stuff I had ever seen and I am very concerned. I grew up near Plant Bowen, a Georgia Power coal-powered plant. I watched Georgia Power buy up property around them, property they had polluted. I’d rather not see a worse version of this.

The Georgia Renewable Power (GRP) plant was never about increasing power generation. Drive towards Comer to Georgia Power’s 10-acre solar farm at Paoli Junction with 3K units to produce an average 200 kWh/month. That’s over seven gigawatts annually. With 50 acres, GRP could have done a solar farm to produce 35 gigawatts of clean and efficient energy. That’s roughly 10 gigawatts less than what the “power plant” is ‘supposed’ to produce. The Colbert plant is projected to produce about an amazingly low 10 percent of Hartwell’s hydroelectric output alone, while taking away 300-million gallons of water that would flow through three dams generating electricity and still being available for drinking or recreation rather than vaporized. The efficiency of the Colbert plant is much less than solar. There’s energy costs not factored into output such as treating the water, pumping the water, powering the plant, etc. Yes, this was never about electricity. Leaders, please do not tell us we all need electricity. Use basic math and you’ll see that you could have easily achieved the same electrical output with other investments – cleaner and proven investments.

This plant is not a power plant anymore. It's a waste incinerator. Our leaders know the county leans right and they want you to think caring about the environment is a liberal cause. It's not. Caring about and demanding cleaner air and water shouldn't be polarizing. Please don't fall for this with rhetoric from our current leaders. Demand better. Research burning creosote crossties and see that other communities didn't even want them to be burned in real waste incinerators!

Do you have a business in Madison County? Wouldn't you like to be a business the IDA has chosen to succeed? This isn't market economics. The IDA has failed time and time again and serves no purpose but ruining a beautiful rural county. It's time for the IDA to be stripped of its power instead of given more power every time they bet the moon on something.

I mentioned wood ash above. Now that this toxic byproduct can't be used for anything useful, what is GRP going to do with it? After they are finished polluting the air will they find a way to leach it into the groundwater? This bait and switch will continue to get worse. GRP will pretend they didn't know all the consequences of burning the creosote.

Crossties. Just because CSX uses them doesn't mean it's our responsibility to do something with them. Frank Ginn says that VOCs on the crossties get into the air anyway and offers no scientific explanations to accept burning them as a lesser outcome. That's narrow and simple-minded thinking. Like many products, creosote wood crossties are cheap because the product cost doesn't bear the cost of disposal. That's left for the public. If you actually read about crosstie production, they are starting to use concrete crossties, steel crossties, composite crossties and some wood crossties not preserved in creosote in other parts of the country. Creosote crossties are a CSX problem. Having cheap disposal options like GRP is shifting the burden to the public and damaging the environment and our community. Creosote crosstie plants are among the most toxic industries on earth and are among the US Environmental Superfund Cleanup Sites (L.A. Clarke & Son, Virginia).

Your leaders say that GRP is just following the law. These were laws that were changed in 2017 by people that have talked about doing away with the EPA altogether. These EPA changes have real consequences and we are just starting to see the effects of those changes. Maybe the county commissioners should bring GRP to the table with a countywide crosstie disposal fee that makes burning them cost prohibitive. Two can play the game of "it's legal." Demand action from your commissioners or vote them out.

Sincerely,

Patrick Cline