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LETTER: Madison Co. scientists voice concern about power plant

Oct 31, 2019

Dear Editor: We are three health and biophysical medicine scientists living in Madison County. Our lifetime of training and practice, and our concern for our fellow citizens prompts us to write this letter. The Madison County biomass power plant must not burn creosote-treated railroad cross ties. It is a step too far.

When plans for the plant were announced in 2017 the citizens of Madison County were promised a clean burning biomass power plant with minimal emissions and noise. Burning creosote-treated cross ties will further break that promise. Prior to 2016 creosote treated cross ties were banned in the United States and many other countries from being used as fuel for power plants like Madison County's. That is because the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) determined that the products of creosote combustion cause several human cancers. But in 2016, bowing to pressure from lobbyists from the treated-wood industry, the EPA disbanded its scientific advisory committee, and agency bureaucrats issued new rules allowing power plants to burn creosote-treated crossties. Under the rules, Georgia and other states were given license to opt out of the new rules, but the Georgia Environmental Protection Division chose to adopt them.

Even before the toxic crossties were considered for fuel, plant emissions were going to be released in large amounts. The data provided by Georgia Renewable Power (GRP), the plant operator, estimates that for each and every day of operation more than 3,000 pounds of noxious gases and volatile organic compounds will be released from the power plant's stack. GRP's own estimate states that more than 500 pounds of particulate matter (soot, not water vapor as promised by GRP) will be released each day of operation. These emissions are strongly associated with many health problems including irritation of skin, eyes, nose, throat, windpipe, and lungs. Some of the gases in low doses will also cause dizziness, headaches and nausea. They also can aggravate conditions such as asthma and emphysema, impaired vision, memory loss, and with prolonged exposure can increase the risks of cancer and heart disease. The addition of 500 pounds of soot daily adds to the health effects of the gases and volatile organic compounds. Knowing these health risks,

our leadership still felt that the power plant was a reasonable trade-off. It would bring in money and produce electricity that the county needs. Notice and information given to the public was minimal, so few citizens objected to having the GRP plant in the county.

Now we learn that GRP plans to add creosote-treated crossties to the fuel mix at the plant. According to EPD documents, GRP estimates that burning these crossties will add 850 more pounds of volatile organic compounds to the stack emissions each and every day of operation. This will be added to the 3,500 pounds of pollutants already coming from the stack each day. The crossties can account for up to 40 percent of the fuel mix, according to state guidelines. Each crosstie at the age of 25 years contains 75 percent of remaining creosote (not six percent as stated by GRP). This data is from a study done by scientists and engineers at the respected Railway Tie Association. If 40 percent of the fuel mix is creosote-treated crossties, then the 850 pounds per day emissions estimate by GRP is far too low. Many of the volatile organic compounds produced by burning creosote are known cancer-causing agents and others are considered probable cancer-causing agents. Soot from burning chemically treated railroad crossties contains several harmful heavy metals. These have a well-documented association with cancers and neurological diseases. Prolonged exposure to known extreme health hazards must not be tolerated at the plant and elsewhere in our county. The burning of crossties makes the plant a negative trade-off for our citizens, especially for those in the vicinity of the plant and those who work there. In addition to health effects on humans, the land, livestock, and crops will suffer health effects.

We call upon GRP to assess and report the levels of noise, constant and in pulses, coming from the power plant and to monitor decibel levels of noise at affected homes near the plant. GRP should honor their promise to be good neighbors and to eliminate or mitigate unhealthy noise levels.

Sincerely,

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