TVA's Plans Could Bring New Work to Idled Plants

Some of the coal-burning power plants that the Tennessee Valley Authority is considering shutting down within the next 20 years to help it meet proposed clean air standards, could get a second life with natural gas or other fuels powering their generators. The federal utility announced plans early this year to idle nine coal-fired generators by 2015, including all six at Widows Creek Fossil Plant on the Tennessee River near Stevenson. Another generating unit at Shawnee Fossil plant in Kentucky and two at John Sevier Fossil Plant in Tennessee are also targeted for shutdown under the plan aimed at helping the utility reduce air emissions from its power plants.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is proposing new rules that would require utilities to reduce emissions from coal-burning power plants by 2015. TVA officials are now considering options for shutting down more coal-fired plants by 2030 as the public utility strives to further reduce air emissions and diversify its power generation options.

About 60 percent of TVA's generation capacity now comes from 11 coal burning power plants, including the Colbert Fossil Plant. Gary Brinkworth, a senior manager for TVA, said the utility plans to reduce reliance on coal and increase its use of nuclear power, natural gas and renewable sources of energy such as biomass, wind and solar in the next 20 years. Brinkworth said the integrated resource plan for TVA's future is not expected to be finalized until 2011, but none of the options being considered call for new coal-burning power plants to be built. “We don't really see any advantage to adding new coal to the system,” he said. “There are still a lot of technology questions over utilities ever being able to successfully capture and sequester carbon from coal plants.”

Coal-burning power plants are coming under increased scrutiny for releasing carbon dioxide and pollutants into the environment. TVA spokesman Scott Brooks said the utility has spent more than $5.3 billion since 1977 to reduce emissions from its coal burning plants. He said the efforts have reduced sulphur dioxide emissions by 91 percent and nitrogen oxide emissions by 89 percent. Sulphur dioxide is a component of acid rain. Nitrogen oxide is a component of smog. By reducing its reliance on coal, TVA officials have said the utility will be able to do even more to help clean the air across the Southeast.

The plans to rely more on nuclear, natural gas and renewable energy for producing electricity and increased efforts to promote energy conservation are causing concern about possible job losses in communities where coal-burning power plants are located. About 200 people work at Colbert Fossil Plant.

Brinkworth stresses no coal plants, other than those announced previously, have been targeted for closure. In addition, some of the closing plants could be converted to use natural gas or other energy sources to produce electricity. Colbert Fossil has three large natural gas lines near the plant. Natural gas is already used there to produce combustion turbine generators that are used to produce electricity during peak demand periods. TVA is building natural gas-powered generators at its John Sevier plant to help make up for the loss of generating capacity from idling the two coal-fired generators there. “This is an example of how we can revitalize or extend the life of sites where we are laying up coal units,” stated Brinkworth.

TVA is considering building natural gas-powered generators at its Allen Fossil Plant near Memphis. Colbert Fossil plant already has the ability to burn wood waste for powering some boilers, which could allow it to become a biomass-fueled plant.