BURNING COAL AT CHESWICK POISONS OUR AIR

The Cheswick Power Station, owned by NRG Energy, has burned coal since coming online in 1970. Because the plant relies on old, outdated and dirty coal to provide power, it is one of the largest sources of air pollution in Allegheny County.

This plant is a major reason why Allegheny County’s air exceeds multiple federal safeguards. Everyone in the region suffers when air pollution is too high, and it is especially dangerous for the 237,000 children whose lungs are still developing, the 208,000 older county residents, and the 280,000 residents with lung or heart disease. For these individuals, dangerous air pollution can result in lost work and school days, hospital visits, and even shortening of their lives. This plant must clean up its pollution so local communities stop suffering from it.

SMOG-CAUSING POLLUTION

Smog is dangerous form of air pollution that is created when certain chemicals react with sunlight. Allegheny County and six neighboring counties are currently in violation of federal smog protections. Nitrogen oxides (NOx) are the main pollutant contributing to smog, and the Cheswick coal plant is by far the largest source of NOx in Allegheny County. Despite costly upgrades to control NOx, the plant’s rate of NOx pollution remains higher than other plants with minimal controls—meaning that the owners may not be running these essential protections at all. If the plant starts running its controls as they were designed to be run, this pollution could be cut up to 90%.

FINE PARTICLE POLLUTION (SOOT)

Soot, another form of air pollution formed by burning coal, is dangerous because it can lodge deep in the lungs, causing chronic breathing problems, and even lead to cancer. Pittsburgh has the 6th worst soot pollution in the country, and Allegheny County was recently found to be in violation of federal safeguards for this pollution. As a result, the County Health Department will have to adopt a plan for bringing the county into compliance, and that plan should include strong limits on soot pollution from the Cheswick plant. The plant’s soot controls have been around since it opened in 1970, and there is better technology available to cut soot pollution, which the plant should utilize. There is currently a nuisance lawsuit being brought against the plant by nearby residents whose homes and property are constantly being coated with ash and soot.

SULFUR DIOXIDE POLLUTION

Sulfur dioxide pollution (SO2) triggers asthma attacks, and causes difficulty breathing and respiratory illness. Exposure to SO2 pollution for as little as five minutes can make it hard for a person to breathe, and high levels can send people to the emergency room. Even though the Cheswick plant installed costly controls to cut its dangerous sulfur pollution by 90%, the
The plant was still the largest source of that pollution in Allegheny County in 2013. The plant's permit is still so lax that it would allow SO2 pollution to increase 10-fold compared to 2013 levels. Although the permit requires that sulfur pollution controls be operated, there is no way to guarantee optimal results without stricter protections. In fact, Cheswick's sulfur pollution nearly tripled between 2013 and 2014.

**EXPIRING AIR POLLUTION PERMIT**

Cheswick’s permit that limits all these pollutants, known as a Title V permit, expires at the end of 2015. The Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) will be renewing it during the summer and fall of 2015, and there will be opportunities for public comment. Strong pollution protections from the ACHD will reduce health risks for everyone, especially the most vulnerable groups including children, seniors, and individuals with respiratory problems.

Please join us in telling ACHD to improve protections against all these pollutants to ensure that public health is priority number one, and that families in the region are able to breathe clean, healthy air.

Learn how you can get involved by contacting Randy Francisco at randy.francisco@sierraclub.org or call (412) 802-6161.

**ENDNOTES**

1 PA Dept. of Environmental Protection, 2013 data: [http://www.ahs.dep.pa.gov/eFACTSWeb/criteria_facilityemissions.aspx](http://www.ahs.dep.pa.gov/eFACTSWeb/criteria_facilityemissions.aspx)
