The 2,250-megawatt Navajo Generating Station, near Page, Arizona, is the largest and dirtiest coal plant in the state. People who live nearby are surrounded by pollution blown from the stacks, which can trigger asthma attacks and contribute to other breathing problems.

Clean Air Task Force estimates that pollution from Navajo Generating Station contributes to 16 premature deaths, 25 heart attacks, 300 asthma attacks, and 15 asthma emergency room visits each year, with total annual health costs of more than $127 million.

**GRAND CANYON’S BIGGEST POLLUTER**

The Navajo Generating Station is 12 miles from Grand Canyon National Park. When the wind blows toward the canyon, the coal plant becomes a major source of industrial haze in the park. When the wind blows in other directions, the plant’s emissions pollute ten protected parks and wilderness areas throughout the Southwest, including Mesa Verde and Canyonlands national parks.

The federal Clean Air Act requires that coal plants be cleaned up to protect human health and the environment. Accordingly, the Navajo coal plant’s pollution must be controlled. In the 1990s, the plant’s owners added pollution control equipment to reduce sulfur dioxide but not other dangerous pollutants. Navajo Generating Station’s three stacks continue to release a combined 20,000 tons of nitrogen oxide (NOx) pollution according to 2011 Environmental Protection Agency Air Markets Program and Toxic Release Inventory data—among the worst of the country’s coal plants—and also emit tens of thousands of pounds of toxic acids, such as hydrochloric acid; neurotoxins, such as mercury and lead; and carcinogens, such as nickel and chromium. Additional controls are now needed for NOx, soot, and airborne toxics such as mercury to reduce haze and protect people from respiratory illnesses, asthma attacks, and neurological damage.

In addition to threatening human health, the Navajo coal plant pollution jeopardizes rare plants, wildlife, and unparalleled outdoor experiences that draw visitors to the area from across the country and around the world. The Navajo Generating Station coal plant threatens the annual economic impact of $687 million to the regional economy from Grand Canyon visitors, as well as the thousands of jobs that depend on the wild beauty and natural health of the region.

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"WE KNOW THE EARTH IS WARMING. WE KNOW PEOPLE ARE CAUSING IT. ARIZONA IS GROUND ZERO FOR CLIMATE CHANGE.”

Jonathan Overpeck, PhD, Nobel Prize-winning climate scientist and co-director, Institute of the Environment, University of Arizona
Enough is enough. In January 2013, the EPA took action and proposed reducing NOx emissions from the Navajo plant by more than 80 percent through the installation of modern pollution controls.

A 2012 study by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) showed that, even with the most effective new pollution controls in place, the Navajo Generating Station could still produce affordable electricity.

The cost of cleaning up the plant would add only pennies to a typical residential power bill. According to the 2012 NREL study, installing even the most thorough pollution controls would raise the electric rates of power customers by less than one percent. During the 1990s, cleaning up acid-rain-causing pollution from the Navajo coal plant ended up costing less than half of what the plant’s operator, Salt River Project, had first estimated. New pollution controls would also mean new jobs for construction, operation and maintenance.

TRANSITION TO A CLEAN ENERGY FUTURE

The Navajo coal plant is also the largest single source of climate-disrupting pollution in Arizona, and the eighth largest single source in the United States. The plant’s annual emissions of more than 16 million tons of climate-altering carbon dioxide contribute to our region’s heat waves and extended drought.

Existing controls don’t capture enough pollution to clean the air. This picture from February 2011 shows a hazy cloud of toxic gases above the white steam plumes. The center and right units have so-called “low NOx” burners installed, which do too little to protect people and Grand Canyon National Park.

Although, in the short-term, the Navajo coal plant should install pollution controls to protect public health and special places, the critical long-term goal should be to transition from coal to truly clean, cost-effective, and sustainable sources of energy—solar and wind power.

Arizona is rich with solar and wind potential. Already, Arizona’s online wind projects power the equivalent of over 33,000 homes, and the NREL estimates that Arizona’s wind resources could provide more than 40 percent of the state’s current electricity needs. Additionally, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, Arizona currently has enough online solar energy to power 22,500 homes, and more than 260 solar companies are creating jobs in the state today.

The Sierra Club supports cleaning up air pollution from the Navajo Generating Station and ultimately transitioning away from coal to clean, renewable energy as a future source of power and economic opportunity for the region.

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