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Deeply Flawed Draft Impact Study of Four Corners Coal Complex Should Send Interior Back to Drawing Board

Cataloging huge deficiencies, groups ask Feds to re-do it “without the blinders on” and properly assess transition options, health, climate, environmental justice

FARMINGTON, N.M. – This week, local community, regional and national environmental groups revealed significant flaws in the Department of the Interior’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Four Corners Power Plant and Navajo Mine Energy Project located on Navajo Nation in northwestern New Mexico. The proposed action in the DEIS would allow the 52-year-old Four Corners Power Plant and Navajo Mine coal complex to continue operations from 2016-2041. The groups call on the Department of the Interior to take a hard look at the cultural, health, biological, and climate costs of one of the nation’s dirtiest coal plants, and to give real consideration to clean energy alternatives before allowing another quarter century of coal combustion and mining.

In comprehensive comments submitted today by Western Environmental Law Center (on behalf of Diné Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment, Center for Biological Diversity, Amigos Bravos, WildEarth Guardians, Sierra Club, and San Juan Citizens Alliance) on the DEIS for the coal complex, the groups catalogue shortcoming after shortcoming in a draft analysis they say is so flawed and superficial that the agency, Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSM), conducting it must have had “the blinders squarely on” while expediting a schedule-driven project.

Deficiencies range from a lack of thorough or expert analysis of alternatives such as early retirement of the power plant in favor of cleaner energy options; inadequate consideration of carbon pollution impacts and climate risks; neglect of public health problems; minimization of water impacts and threats from coal combustion waste (CCW); ignoring Navajo law and impacts to local culture; and failing to assess financial terms and trust assets at the coal complex. As a result, the groups conclude in their comments, the Department of the Interior’s current DEIS cannot be used to justify any decision to prolong the mine or power plant.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Department of the Interior must thoroughly assess the full impact of prolonging these aging coal operations, and must compare those impacts to alternative sources of energy, including renewable resources such as wind and solar generation. Instead, the Department of the Interior ignored critical data and available scientific resources that would provide the public and decision-makers with a fair and comprehensive analysis of the likely impacts of another 25 years of coal-fired power from the Navajo Mine and Four Corners Power Plant. By rubber-stamping the status quo for decades to come, the federal government has left local residents and communities to assume all the pollution dangers and financial risks.

“Resident human health remains at high risk in the impacted areas from both coal ash and the coal burning power plant,” said Sarah Jane White of Diné Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment. “The DEIS claims that health impacts from 25 more years of FCPP and Navajo Mine would be minor when there are known public health crises throughout the area. I would count more than half the population in the Four Corners area suffering from respiratory, kidney, heart, digestive system, and central brain problems, meningitis, cancer, and rheumatoid arthritis from living in this pollution, so don’t tell me there is no health impact in the Four Corners. The DEIS complete failure on public health represents one of the worst environmental justice situations in the country.”

“OSM’s failure to adequately assess the health and water impacts from the continued burning of coal at Four Corners Power Plant is unacceptable,” said Nellis Kennedy-Howard, Sierra Club. “Four Corners Power Plant is over 50 years old – it’s time to begin thinking about clean and safe alternatives in renewable energy.”

“We are disappointed that OSM has failed to fulfill its obligations under the National Environmental Policy Act to ensure that the impacts of another 25 years of operation at this coal complex are presented both to the agency and to the public,” said Megan Anderson of the Western Environmental Law Center. “Without an honest accounting of impacts, OSM cannot make a rational decision about continued operations.”

“The Draft EIS improperly attempts to minimize and obscure the well-documented fact that mercury and selenium pollution from Four Corners and other regional coal plants imperil the survival and recovery of highly endangered fish species in the San Juan River,” said Michael Saul, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. “The federal agencies cannot simply rubber-stamp the same lethal coal development that their own science shows to be causing fish extinctions.”

Communities and power companies throughout the U.S. are getting out of long-term spending on coal precisely because of those pollution dangers and financial risks. Historic owners at Four Corners Power Plant are leaving, including Southern California Edison and El Paso Electric, while BHP Billiton has already sold the mine and will exit in 2006. This leaves Arizona Public Service (APS) as the majority owner of the Four Corners Power Plant, shouldering the massive investment required to keep the electricity flowing to Phoenix, and Navajo Nation taking over

ownership of the Navajo Mine. It appears APS and Navajo Nation will take on the increased regulatory liabilities stacking up on coal including CCW, carbon/greenhouse gases, Mercury and Air Toxics and numerous deficient permits while retrofitting the aged Four Corners Power Plant.

“Given the increased recognition of the correlation between coal fired power plant emissions and extreme environmental, economic and health impacts, it is alarming the Department of the Interior continues the sacrifice of the Southwest region of U.S.,” said Mike Eisenfeld, New Mexico Energy Coordinator for San Juan Citizens Alliance. “The Interior Dept. is ignoring renewable technologies and innovation in order to prioritize 25 more years of the coal complex, and doing this at the same time that the scientific community and Obama administration acknowledge climate change, increased drought, wildfire, and water scarcity currently occurring in the region. The Department of the Interior must address the deficiencies in the draft version of their EIS.”