



A Chicago publication of the Medill School of Journalism

 Search

- HOME
- BUSINESS
- CO. PROFILES
- LEGAL
- SCIENCE
- URBAN
- CLIENTS
- CONTACT US
- FAQ
- ARCHIVES

## Coal-fired power plants leave residents of Pilsen breathless

BY ANNA PICKERING  
JUNE 05, 2002

Anne Pickering

Medill News Service

Members of the Hispanic community are frustrated at what they see as slow progress in getting toxic emissions from two coal-fired power plants in the neighborhood of Pilsen -Little Village cleaned up.

Last February, Alderman Edward M. Burke (14) proposed an ordinance that would have imposed stricter pollution controls by 2006 on the Fisk Station and Crawford Station coal-burning power plants owned by Midwest Generation LLC, a subsidiary of Edison International.

While Burke's proposal initially heartened residents of Pilsen-Little Village, community organizer Kim Nieto, with the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, said it hadn't amounted to much.

Carmen Velasquez, director of the Alivio Medical Center, two blocks from Fisk, said that asthma is a major problem among residents of the southside community. Velasquez and other members of the Hispanic community met with Midwest Generation officials and Alderman Burke last summer to discuss the plants but little came of it.

While the Clean Air Act of 1977 and 1990, mandated reductions in allowable emissions of smog-forming nitrogen oxide and acid rain causing sulfur dioxide, it exempted old plants that had already been built. However, a provision in the Act called "new-source review" states that if a plant is upgraded to generate more electricity, then the plant needs to install modern state of the art emissions control equipment. The Environmental Protection Agency is suing the Tennessee Valley Authority under the "new-source review" provision to get it to clean up some of its polluting coal-fired plants.

Plants operating under clean air act regulations, are issued permits that state allowable emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide. The Fisk and Crawford plants while not required to reduce emissions of sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, have voluntarily reduced some emissions. Alderman Burke's proposed ordinance would require that the plants install the most modern emissions control equipment.

A recent study by the New York University School of Medicine linked long exposure to air pollution especially soot particles found in polluted city air to an increased risk of dying from lung cancer. The study said the risk was comparable to living with a smoker. The soot is emitted by cars, trucks, coal-fired power plants and industrial plants. Chicago's air has a particulate rating greater than the EPA level.

Coal-fired power plants are also one of the largest sources of airborne mercury. The Illinois Department of Public Health recently issued a statewide alert advising women who are pregnant, nursing or of child-bearing age against eating fish caught in any Illinois body of water more than once a week. The officials cited the risk of methylmercury contamination. Mercury released into the air by coal-fired power plants is transformed into methylmercury, a neurotoxin, when it falls into water.

The City of Chicago Department of the Environment is currently engaged in talks with Midwest Generation to clean up Fisk and Crawford, according to Jessica Rio, a spokesman for the department. Rio said the mayor's energy plan called for stricter air pollution standards for coal-burning plants. The City wants Midwest Generation to take voluntary action.

According to Brian Urbaszewski of the American Lung Association, part of the talks between the City and Midwest Generation relate to an agreement made in 1999 when Commonwealth Edison, a subsidiary of Exelon Corp., sold its fleet of fossil fuel plants to Midwest Generation. That agreement called for Midwest Generation to build a 500-megawatt plant, a \$250 million project. The plant was not built because there was no longer a need for additional power. It has been rumored that the City wants Midwest Generation to invest in renewable energy projects and to reduce emissions from Fisk and Crawford instead.

Midwest Generation is strongly opposed to Alderman Burke's ordinance according to company spokesman Doug McFarlane. McFarlane said that even a new coal power plant could not meet the strict standards proposed in the ordinance. The company says it has invested \$35 million in equipment to reduce nitrogen oxides which have been reduced 50 percent in the Crawford plant. Work on the Fisk plant will start in the fall. The company also asserts that it is burning low sulfur coal to control sulfur dioxide emissions.

Environmentalists say that the federal government will be lowering allowable nitrogen oxide emissions in 2004 and that the early reduction Midwest Generation is doing will allow the company to trade credit in the future.

Mercury emissions are not presently regulated nor is there any current technology to reduce this form of pollution. Midwest Generation is currently investing in technology to reduce mercury emissions. p5/2007 1:46 PM



- MEDILL
- MNS D. C.
- ADMIN LOGIN

© 1997 -- 2005  
MEDILL CHICAGO  
NEWS SERVICE —  
NORTHWESTERN  
UNIVERSITY