

CAMP'S Response to Rolf Westgard & Duluth News Tribune:
October 17, 2007

Recently an opinion piece by Rolf Westgard was published in the Duluth News Tribune, advocating for Excelsior Energy's Mesaba Project – a power plant proposed to be built near the Scenic Highway in Itasca County.

"Clean" Coal

Mr. Westgard's premise that it is possible to use coal "cleanly" echoes the Bush administration's "clean coal initiative", an oxymoron and myth designed to obscure coal's problems and enhance the financial interests of the coal industry. People are tempted by the promise of "clean coal" because it is abundant in the U.S. and has a relatively low direct cost. Federal policy and incentives enable promoters of IGCC technology to mislead the public about claimed benefits.

Under these circumstances, Mr. Westgard may be correct in saying that coal's share of electric energy generation in the U.S. is projected to increase to 57% by 2030. That does not mean that it's a good thing or that thoughtful citizens shouldn't work to avoid it. Even though some reduction in SO₂ emissions is achieved by IGCC technology, it is still dirty and contributes to all of the health and environmental problems known to be caused by coal mining, transport and combustion.

In the contested case proceeding the administrative law judges (ALJs), relying on an analysis by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), compared IGCC technology to supercritical (SCPC) and ultrasupercritical (USC) pulverized coal plants. They found that although the Project is expected to significantly outperform future SO₂ emission reductions of the other technologies, it is expected to only slightly outperform them in reducing particulate matter emissions, and to slightly underperform them in reducing NO_x emissions. The ALJs also found that IGCC technology is not inherently better at controlling mercury emissions.

Efficiency

A plant with higher heat efficiency produces fewer emissions for each unit of electricity produced. Mr. Westgard claims that the Mesaba Project would be one of the world's most efficient coal plants. The MPCA and the ALJs concluded that, operating on subbituminous coal, Mesaba's thermal efficiency would be 36.3%. This is lower than the EPA would expect from a "generic" IGCC plant (40%), SCPC plants (37.9%), and USC plants (41.9%).

Capture and Sequestration of Carbon Dioxide

Mr. Westgard ignores the problems of capturing and sequestering CO₂. Excelsior has no intention of capturing CO₂ until it is required to do so. It admits that currently available technology would enable it to capture only 30% of Mesaba's five million annual tons. This would also increase the cost for electricity that already costs 30% more than electricity available from other sources, including renewables. This is one of the reasons why the MPUC found Mesaba's proposed power purchase agreement not to be in the public interest.

The Mesaba Project is planned for a site that is about as far as it could be from potential sequestration sites. Piping the CO₂ to western North Dakota or Canada would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, and it would reduce the efficiency of the plant by 10%. The feasibility of large-scale and/or long-term sequestration has not yet been proven. There are known environmental and health dangers from migrating and escaping CO₂. A new coal-powered plant built today can be expected to operate for fifty years. We must not allow such proliferation of greenhouse gases.

Excelsior Energy has already received about \$40 million in public subsidies to promote and develop the Mesaba Project. It is counting on between \$800 million and \$1.6 billion in federal loan guarantees and \$130 million in federal tax credits. Such sums of money could better be spent on research and development of alternative and renewable sources of energy and improved distribution systems to replace dirty coal as the mainstay of our electric energy generation.