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PGE puts pollution gear at \$300 million

Haze - The state DEQ will review proposed additions to the coal-fired Boardman plant

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Portland General Electric proposed Monday to spend about \$300 million installing pollution controls at its coal-fired power plant near Boardman, which contributes to muddy skies around Mount Hood and in the Columbia River Gorge.

An analysis paid for by PGE and submitted to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality on Monday projects the improvements -- including scrubbers -- will reduce the plant's emissions of haze-causing pollution by 75 percent. They should also reduce the types of pollution that create acid rain and fog in the Columbia Gorge.

The proposal comes as new federal clean air rules, arising from concern about haze at the Grand Canyon, force PGE to find ways of controlling the plant's emissions.

The company will simultaneously install equipment to capture more than 90 percent of the plant's emissions of toxic mercury, as required by an earlier DEQ mandate.

The cost of the upgrades will eventually show up on power bills, raising rates an estimated 3 percent, said PGE spokeswoman Gail Baker.

But they should also translate into clearer skies in the region's natural areas, from Mount Hood to Hells Canyon on the Idaho line, according to the analysis for PGE by CH2M Hill and Black & Veatch, two consulting companies. With the new controls, the plant would contribute less than half as much to the haze around Mount Hood on the most polluted days of the year, it says.

The DEQ plans to hire an independent expert to review PGE's proposal, said Brian Finneran of the agency's air quality division. The state and federal government must each decide whether to accept the company's plan or require more stringent controls.

The public will also have a say, and on Monday, environmental groups were skeptical. They said more aggressive pollution controls installed on other power plants may have potential to reduce emissions more than PGE has proposed.

"It's not a matter of spending money for money's sake," said Allison LePlante, an attorney at the Pacific Environmental Advocacy Center, a legal group at Lewis & Clark Law School that represents environmental groups. "It's about finding the best technology that provides the most effective emissions reductions."

Boardman is Oregon's only coal-fired power plant and was authorized in 1975, just in time to avoid tough pollution control requirements under the Clean Air Act. It's now one of a few coal plants in the West without modern pollution controls such as scrubbers.

Studies have identified it as a source of haze in natural areas including Mount Hood, Mount Rainier and Mount Jefferson.

Idaho Power, General Electric Capital Corp. and Power Resources Cooperative are minority owners of

the power plant and support the pollution control plan, Baker said. The Boardman plant produces about 20 percent of the power generated by PGE.

While coal-fired power plants are among the dirtiest sources of electricity, the Boardman plant is important to maintaining PGE's diverse power supply, said Arya Behbehani-Divers, PGE's manager of environmental services. It can supply power even when other, less-polluting sources such as wind and hydroelectric power run short.

Investing in pollution controls, while expensive, "keeps Boardman economically viable for our customers," she said.

PGE would install the pollution controls over five years, finishing by 2013, said Behbehani-Divers. But the DEQ hopes to expedite the process so it's done sooner, Finneran said.

The analysis completed for PGE examined various options for controlling sulfur and nitrogen emissions and small soot particles known as particulates. It weighed different pollution controls against their costs and other factors such as how well they can be integrated into the design of the Boardman plant.

For example, the study looked at two methods of controlling nitrogen emissions -- one that would cost about \$50 million and the other at a cost of about \$224 million. While the more expensive option might further reduce emissions, it would not be enough to justify the cost, which would run so high it could force the plant to close, the study found.

The controls identified as the best option would reduce the amount of nitrogen pollution formed as coal is burned to generate power. Scrubbers, meanwhile, would be installed to capture sulfur pollution before it escapes from the plant.

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