



The TRAILBLAZER

April 2008

Niagara Group of the Sierra Club

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Is "Clean Coal" a Possibility? *by Art Klein*

My Fellow Western New Yorkers, when the NRG, Corporation, announced their intention to expand the Huntley Power Plant with "clean coal" technology, a great hurrah arose from our local elected officials and many Western New Yorkers. We are eager for any good news.

But clean coal is a promise that cannot be fulfilled.

We must all realize that coal generated electric power, from the mining, its transportation to the many plants and the deposit of the ash could conceivably destroy more than it benefits.

In less than thirty years modern coal mining has destroyed more than a million acres of Appalachia, an area about the size of the State of Delaware. Huge machines gouge gigantic holes in the earth, level mountains, fill streams and destroy communities. The results may not look like mother earth for a thousand years and the streams will never return. We must do better.

Coal burning destroys our air and water. After years of defending and losing in the courts the coal burners have invented a new justification for coal-fired utilities called sequestration. This process theoretically will pump pollutants to a suitable underground chamber that contains the proper medium to store the toxic fumes. Honest, that is what they assure us.

One problem is the cost of the building and maintaining the pipelines and pumps. Then, once we find a place to store it, will it stay there or drift slowly back to

our air and ground water through fractures or permeable geological formations? Nobody knows, for sure. Is it worth the danger? Then we have the mountains of the fly ash from the chimneys and scrubbers and heavier coal ashes from the burning. About a third of this is utilized by industry in plaster manufacturing and the like. But the remainder will haunt future generations forever. We already knew the ash was toxic, but recent scientific studies demonstrate that fly ash can contain more radioactive material than the waste from nuclear generating plants.

We have already fouled our air and waters nearly beyond repair. Climate change, the growth of asthma related illness and the growing numbers of recent botulism related deaths of much wildlife in the Great Lakes Basin signals a multi level day of reckoning may be nearer than we would like.

In New York State, in the Adirondack Forest Preserve, coal plant emissions have destroyed more than one-half of the large canopy red spruce. Acid precipitation from coal burning has turned many of the most beautiful lakes of the Adirondacks to lifeless puddles.

Our leaders should work toward adding a thousand technical jobs in Western New York devoted to solar and wind energy not another construction project that will deliver more problems than benefit.

Think global and act local is no longer an environmental slogan but a call to take action here in Western New York, now.

Reflections on NRG Energy's Huntley Coal Power Plant Proposal And a Few Comments about Stopping Coal-Burning in Jamestown *by Walter Simpson*

NRG Energy's proposal to build a new 600 MW coal-fired power plant in Tonawanda, replacing part of the Huntley power station's existing old coal capacity, has elicited mostly yawns from the local environmental community. Meanwhile many of us have focused on a much smaller 43 MW conventional coal plant proposed by the Jamestown Board of Public Utilities and there now exists an informal coalition of 14 environmental groups, including Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and the Apollo Alliance, clearly on record opposed to the construction of this plant – with or without a carbon capture demonstration project associated with it.

Why is there wholehearted opposition to Jamestown but mostly silence or confusion about Huntley?

Before I address that question, let me indicate that Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter is getting pretty clear on Huntley. The Chapter appears to be opposed to it and is asking the Apollo Alliance, of which Sierra Club is an important member, not to endorse it.

I think part of the reason the Huntley coal proposal has been given a pass (including by Sierra Club Niagara Group – though Art Klein is rallying us!) is that our plates are full and we are distracted by other important environmental issues and causes. This is understandable

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and maybe forgivable but we don't want to get so distracted that we forget about the big elephant in the room (global warming and climate change) and the urgent need to address coal plants – the existing ones that are now spewing massive amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and proposed new ones which could make climate change much worse.

Other reasons for our inaction on Huntley might be that it has been billed as a giant economic development project, promising many jobs, and it is difficult to oppose that in an economically depressed area like Western New York. Also, NRG appears to have good intentions. NRG has been haranguing other companies in the power plant business to recognize the danger of climate change and the need to accept mandatory limits on CO2 emissions. Also, NRG wants to build an integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC) power plant which would use advanced technology to separate and capture CO2 emissions. And, even more importantly, NRG (unlike Jamestown) is on record promising to sequester this carbon underground in appropriate geological strata for the lifespan of the power plant.

So for all of these reasons I think there is a tendency to cut NRG some slack or even support their effort. Moreover, the U.S. is highly reliant on coal for electricity generation and this is not likely to change soon. 55% of U.S. electric come from burning coal, and China is said to be opening one new coal plant a week! So it is arguable that we have to find a way to burn coal without making climate change worse. Maybe it makes sense to try it right here in Tonawanda. NRG thinks so as do many others.

Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter reminds us that the national club has established three core principles for evaluating proposed new coal-fired power plants, as follows:

- The coal that the power plant would burn must be mined responsibly
- The power plant must burn cleanly
- There must be a way to safely dispose of any global warming pollution, i.e. the power plant's carbon dioxide emissions

While we are all appalled by mountain top removal coal mining, it remains to be seen whether any kind of coal mining could be responsible from an environmental and labor safety point of view. So maybe no coal-fired generation will ever satisfy the first criterion. And while carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies need to be developed, it certainly is not clear now how well they will work and how much they will cost. NRDC appears to be taking the position that Huntley deserves conditional support because there is such a great need, globally, to develop CCS technologies. Coal burning is not going to go away just because we don't like coal mining, so (this argument goes) let's figure out ways to burn it without leading our beautiful planet down the path to climate

catastrophe. I think that is a defensible position. Not everyone in Sierra Club would agree.

So what to say or do about NRG Energy's Huntley IGCC/CCS proposal?

We could outright oppose it as environmental purists or we could support it with some or all of these conditions:

- NRG must promise to buy coal only from responsible coal mining operations (are there any?) or at least agree to join with environmentalists in lobbying for an end to the most egregious coal mining techniques like mountain top removal mining. (When I suggested this to a NRG executive at a recent Apollo Alliance meeting, he answered by saying that NRG does not have the power to influence the way coal is mined – a reply I did not quite believe).
- NRG must invest in efficiency improvements and renewable energy development in our region as part of the Huntley package.
- NRG must explain to our satisfaction how it can ensure that its proposed new IGCC plant would only operate with CCS -- when CCS commercialization is unproven. What if CCS in general or in this geographical region does not work or is astronomically expensive? What then? Would NRG change its mind and operate its new Huntley plant without CCS?
- NRG must promise not to seek and use funds raised by the sale of pollution allowances under the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (or not receive more than a certain amount) since those RGGI funds would be best spent on more cost-effective energy conservation and efficiency and the development of renewable energy resources.

This is all very complicated and raises other questions. For example, is there even a need for NRG's new proposed plant? (There isn't for Jamestown's.) Doesn't it make more sense to meet all expected new electric loads and displace existing loads with energy conservation and renewables? Even if new fossil fuel power plants are not needed, does New York State have an energy planning process that would allow us to select that option? If we need to test and develop CCS, doesn't it make more sense to choose CCS technologies which can be used on existing coal-fired power plants instead of building new ones to test CCS on? As we move toward the use of plug-in hybrid vehicles, will electric demand increase significantly, increasing the pressure to burn more coal (or build new nuclear plants)? And if that is the case, shouldn't we be supporting new IGCC/CCS as a better alternative when compared to conventional coal or nuclear?

However, all of this brain-teasing and hand-wringing about Huntley may be moot since it is rumored that the Spitzer Administration is not interested in coming up with \$1.5 billion in subsidies to make Huntley work

economically. But that raises another question, namely if the Huntley proposal fails, should CCS be tried in Jamestown? While the Spitzer Administration is thinking about this, members of the aforementioned Clean Energy for Jamestown Coalition have already answered that question with a resounding "No!"

Irrespective of the fate of NRG's Huntley proposal, there are a great many reasons for continuing to oppose the proposed Jamestown coal-burner -- not the least of which is that Jamestown has made no commitment to CCS for the 50-60 year lifespan of their plant. Also, the Jamestown coal plant will bankrupt the city. Even without CCS the cost of its electricity will be much higher than the clean energy alternatives we have proposed. Add in the 2 to 4 cents per kilowatt hour extra costs of doing CCS and its power will be so expensive no one will want to buy it. If that premium were subsidized by the New York State, the bill over 50 years would be over \$500 million. That sum is not as large as Huntley's \$1.5 billion, but its not small potatoes. If that kind of money was available in state coffers, there are much better ways of spending it.

On the federal level we need strong laws to stop the environmental abuse of coal mining. Here in New York we need a Spitzer Administration policy that would block the construction of any new coal plants until CCS is proven and guaranteed. And it can be proven elsewhere. We don't need to spend these vast sums of state taxpayer money to prove it within our state boundaries. Instead we should be moving full speed ahead with energy conservation and efficiency and the development of renewable energy resources. We know they work. We know they are clean. We know they are cost-effective.

Niagara Group Joins Erie Group in Opposing Tires Project

Please visit our website, <http://newyork.sierraclub.org/niagara/> to view a letter from Robert M. Ciesielski, Chairman of the Sierra Club, Niagara Group to Mr. Charles Benson, Chairman of the Lake Erie Group of the Pennsylvania Sierra Club regarding the Erie, Pennsylvania Tire Plant.

Riverside Salem Church Encourages Environmental Projects

A somewhat unusual church exists on Grand Island, at 3449 West River Road. It is affiliated with the United Church of Christ and with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It usually meets on Sunday afternoons at 4:00, followed by a pot luck supper, but the schedule differs in the summer months. Many members are also members elsewhere. The meetings take place in a cabin, with those who attend sitting in a circle near a stove.

Recently the church has been building a straw-bale building on the grounds of their Environmental Chapel. It was included in the National Solar Tour as a Green
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Annual Dinner

The Niagara Group Annual Dinner is scheduled for Monday, April 28, 2008 at the Eagle House Restaurant, 5578 Main Street, Williamsville, New York 14221. The Group will present its annual award to an outstanding local environmentalist. The function will commence at 5:45pm. All are invited.

If you wish to attend, please make your reservations with Bob Ciesielski at 94 Lamarck Drive, Amherst, New York 14226, 716-895-3367 (office), 716-839-0180 (home), or by email at rmciesie@yahoo.com

Niagara Group Taking Leadership Positions

We are honored that many of our Niagara Group members now are in leadership roles and chairing committees in the Atlantic Chapter. Included in that number are:

Joe Gardella, *political action (endorsements)*
Liz Kaszubski, *wetlands*
Larry Beahan, *open space and sprawl*
Richard Lippes, *counsel*
Marion Owczarczak, *website*

Atlantic Chapter's 2008 Conservation Priority Issues

- I. Top Five Rankings
 - 1) Global Warming
 - 2) Clean Water/Watersheds
 - 3) Energy
 - 4) Open Space/Sprawl
 - 5) Wetlands
- II. Second Five Rankings
 - 6) Farm & Food
 - 7) Solid Waste
 - 8) Environmental Education
 - 9) Wilderness & Wildlife
 - 10) Transportation
- III. Other 2008 Chapter Conservation Action Committees
(In alphabetical order) Adirondacks, Air Quality, Airports, Biodiversity/Vegetarian Outreach, Catskills, Environmental Justice, Forests, Grazing, Great Lakes, Hudson River, International Issues, Population, Sterling Forest, Toxic Wastes

June 28th Atlantic Chapter Meeting

The Niagara Group will be hosting a quarterly meeting for the Executive Committee of the Atlantic Chapter in Western New York on June 28, 2008. The Atlantic Chapter represents the State of New York and is comprised of approximately 50,000 members. If you are interested in helping host the meeting, or would like to attend the Saturday session of the Chapter, please contact Bob Ciesielski at 716-895-3367 (office) or by email at rmciesie@yahoo.com. We will have more details posted on our Niagara Group website as they become available.

Two Important Events Scheduled at Stella Niagara *by Ed McGreevy*

Stella Niagara, 4221 Lower River Road, corner of Pletcher Road, Lewiston will be the site of two events of interest to individuals and organizations concerned with protecting our environment.

- On Saturday April 26, 2008 at 3P.M., Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will give a free lecture on "Our Environmental Destiny." Reservations are required. Information is available at 716-754-2193 or email: fund14144@yahoo.com.

- From April 4 through 13, 2008, Theatre in the Mist and The Edwin Mellen Press will present "An Enemy of the People" by Ibsen as adapted by Arthur Miller. This play presents the story of a small Norwegian town beginning to win fame and wealth through its medicinal spring waters. Dr. Stockman, resident physician in charge, discovers that the waters are being poisoned by waste from a tannery causing serious illness among tourists. He expects this important discovery to be his great-

est achievement, and sends a report to the mayor. Public officials refuse to address the problem. He is denounced as an enemy of the people.

Performances are scheduled for Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 P.M. and Sundays at 2P.M. Information is available at 1-877-856-0694 and www.theatreinthemist.org.

visit our website for more articles!
<http://newyork.sierraclub.org/niagara/>

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 Buildings Project.

The church deals not only with environmental issues, but with other progressive causes. It participates in the Interfaith Peace Network and in the Indigenous Women's Initiatives program. During January the church held a series of meetings concerning evil, and showed films concerning torture in prison camps.

Everyone is invited, whether or not they consider themselves to be "Christian." For more information, go to the website at www.riversidesalem.org.

If you have information you wish to share or copy for use in the Trailblazer, please send it to Charles Lamb at 335 Walnut Lane, Youngstown, NY 14174 or clamb9@roadrunner.com or call 716-745-7037. Deadlines for the year are as follows: March 1, June 1, September 1, and January 1.

The Niagara Group of the Sierra Club meets on the 4th Tuesday of every month at 7p.m. at Daemen College, Dunn Scotus Hall, room 222. All Sierrans are invited!

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