

Puget Sound Energy Urged to Break Coal Connection

Local News

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A new coalition considers Puget Sound Energy (PSE) a utility company with a split personality. On one hand, it is making impressive investments in wind and solar power. On the other, it is still a major owner of the second-largest coal plant in the western United States.

Coal-Free PSE is urging the utility to give up its stake in the Colstrip Generating Facility in Montana, which is involved in its third [lawsuit](#) over water pollution in the past decade. Colstrip supplies about one-third of its power to PSE; the remainder is divided between other co-owner utilities, including two that also serve Washington customers, PacifiCorp and Avista.

Anne Hedges, program director with the Montana Environmental Information Center, says utility customers in Washington may not realize they're paying for electricity from an out-of-state plant that has been plagued with pollution problems.

"Our state has a pattern of ignoring the law and failing to protect ground and surface waters - both water quality and water quantity. That's why we were forced to sue the state, to protect our members who ranch and hunt in the Colstrip area."

The new lawsuit asks the state of Montana to make the firm that supplies the coal, Westmoreland Coal Company, address the water-quality problems before it goes ahead with plans to expand the Rosebud mine. Hedges says ranching families and conservation groups have gone to court before, about the coal-ash ponds at the Colstrip site.

"Colstrip's owners already paid neighboring landowners \$25 million for contaminating their groundwater because of these leaking ash ponds. But the water problems there persist; the ash ponds have not been cleaned up."

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality defends its coal-mine permitting program and says it offered to negotiate with the plaintiffs to avoid legal action.

The Coal-Free PSE coalition considers the utility's Montana connection a financial liability for Washington ratepayers, as well as an environmental liability in Montana. The coalition says using coal doesn't fit PSE's image as a clean energy leader in the Northwest, and is urging the company to focus on cleaner alternatives. Puget Sound Energy supplies power in 11 Washington counties.

More information about the lawsuit is online at westernlaw.org.

By: Chris Thomas