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Column: Mattoon area best site for FutureGen

By: Bill Lair, Managing Editor

The best site for FutureGen still is Mattoon or Tuscola.

When FutureGen and Department of Energy officials were in the area recently for public meetings, nothing was presented that convinced me FutureGen would be bad for East Central Illinois.

Those who voiced objections at the Mattoon hearing admitted their objections were “back yard” concerns.

They just don’t want this experimental power plant of the future close to their property.

I can appreciate that objection. I don’t think I would like to live next door to a \$1-billion power plant.

But I would like to have it in my county!

I believe science and location make Mattoon and Tuscola the best places for FutureGen.

I’m no scientist, but what data I have seen tells me that the two Texas sites just don’t measure up.

But, here is what really knocks my socks off about FutureGen:

I am not aware of any environmental group opposing FutureGen.

Think about it. The FutureGen proposal has been public for more than a year. There have been public meetings in the final four sites plus those that were in the “semifinal” 12.

No environmentalist has come out against the project that I am aware of.

In fact, several support it.

John Thompson of the Clean Air Task Force went on record last year in support of FutureGen's proposal to burn coal, but sequester the plant emissions underground.

"We see coal at a crossroads," he said. "We have to find a way to use coal for energy, but reduce the impact of carbon dioxide and other pollutants from coal-fired power plants.

"FutureGen is the best thing we can do for now to show the world how to better use coal," he added. "We are the only hope for the planet."

Also last year, at a FutureGen task force meeting in Springfield, Howard Learner, executive director of the Illinois Environmental Law & Policy Center, lent his support to the project.

At the public hearings last month, one of the exhibits included charts with the amount of pollutants that will be emitted by FutureGen and the amount of pollutants coming out of some existing coal-generated power plants.

The chart showed:

-- A state-of-the-art plant built in 1990 emits 6.2-million tons per year of sulphuric acid, nitric acid, mercury and carbon dioxide.

-- A state-of-the-art plant built in 2000 emits 4.5-million tons a year of the same pollutants.

-- The Polk Power Plant in Tampa, Fla., (similar to one in Terre Haute) built in 1996 emits 1.4-million tons a year.

-- A plant that just opened in Orlando, Fla., this year emits 1.8-million tons a year.

And FutureGen?

-- The chart shows that the FutureGen plant will emit 280,000 tons a year. That is 1.1-million tons a year less than the next-cleanest power plant in existence today.

That's pretty impressive.

Here are two other things that make this area the right spot for FutureGen.

(1) We know coal in Illinois.

Jack Lavin, director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, stated it best:

“Illinois is a coal state, not an oil and gas state.”

Texas, of course, is an oil and gas state.

Phil Gonet of the Illinois Coal Association said the first commercial coal mine in Illinois opened in 1810 — almost 200 years ago! That’s how long Illinois has worked with coal.

Gonet also said Illinois has more coal than Saudi Arabia and Kuwait combined have oil. Illinois alone has enough coal to supply the country’s needs for almost 100 years.

Mark McKoy of DOE said after the hearing in Mattoon that more concern was expressed here than in Texas.

That’s because, he said, no one lives near the Texas sites.

(2) That’s also part of the Mattoon and Tuscola advantage.

Pamphlets produced by the National Energy Technology Laboratory for the public hearings points out that if Mattoon is selected as the FutureGen site, sequestration is located on the same parcel of land as the power plant. The carbon dioxide will be buried at a depth of 1.3 to 1.6 miles below ground.

The proposed sequestration site for Tuscola is about 2 miles southwest of Arcola, 11 miles from the Tuscola power plant site and just a few miles from the Mattoon site. A pipeline would need to be built.

The proposed Jewett, Texas, sequestration site is 33 miles northeast of the power plant site. A pipeline is needed.

At Odessa, Texas, sequestration would be 58 miles south of the power plant. Some existing pipelines might be available.

The Mattoon site is the most compact. No pipeline is needed.

Ann Short, the mayor of Sullivan, voiced support for FutureGen in Illinois and, especially, in Mattoon.

Lavin also noted that Indiana supports Illinois' bid with Purdue University joining SIU-Carbondale and the University of Illinois as leading nearby coal research institutions.

The economic benefits of FutureGen also were revealed in a recent study. It showed the average salary from FutureGen-related jobs will be \$66,000 a year.

FutureGen: It's good for the environment, it's good for the economy and it will set an example for the world.

We look forward to the FutureGen Alliance decision this fall on where this plant will be built.