

Group: Power plants pose threat

Report: New plants will pollute as much as 12.5 million cars

*By Douglas Crowl
The Daily Times-Call*

BOULDER — An environmental group released a report Tuesday to urge lawmakers in Colorado and four Southwestern states to pass laws to curb greenhouse gases, particularly from coal-fired power plants, to stop global warming.

Spokesmen for major electricity suppliers say conserving energy is good, but the country still needs the coal plants.

The report by Environmental Defense, “Climate Alert: Cleaner Energy for the Southwest,” says that more than a dozen proposed power plants in Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and Utah could release 70 million tons of carbon dioxide a year — equivalent to 12.5 million cars running for a year.

The increases could perpetuate global warming in the West, which could reduce winter tourism, increase wildfire dangers and prolong droughts.

“The Aspen Ski Company sees climate change as the greatest threat to the ski industry,” said Matt Hamilton of Aspen Skiing Co., who sat in on a news conference for the report’s release.

Though lawmakers in several Western states have curbed greenhouse gas emissions from coal-fired plants, the proposed plants could be grandfathered in to avoid new restrictions, said John Nielsen, co-author of the report and energy program director for Western Resource Advocates in Boulder.

A plant proposed by Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association in eastern Colorado was included in the report, but a company spokesman said reports on what they could build are speculation because the project is so far off.

“They have taken what our board approved in 2005 and really run with it,” said Tri-State spokesman Jim Van Someren.

Either way, he said, coal-fired plants are the backbone of energy production in the United States, and that probably won’t change.

“I think from Tri-State’s perspective, we believe there is a need for a balanced mix of renewable resources and coal,” he said.

The report says that coupling renewable energy resources with energy efficiency in the West can end the need for new coal-fired plants altogether.

“Right now, the reality of it is that we are not there yet,” Tom Henly, spokesman for Xcel Energy, said of ending coal-fired plant construction.

He said his company is finding ways to reduce the need for coal-fired plants, “but the bottom line is that more people are moving to Colorado and more people are using electricity than ever before.”

Authors of the report say something can be done.

“What we are talking about is robust implementation of off-the-shelf, existing energy efficiency,” said Boulder Mayor Mark Ruzzin, who was speaking for the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project.

Requiring companies to build energy-efficient new homes is one example of many.

A large effort across the West could save 100,000 megawatts of energy by 2020, he said.

“If we achieve that ... it would eliminate the need to construct 34 coal-fired power plants in the Southwest,” Ruzzin said.

The Southwest also is blessed with the potential to develop renewable energy resources such as wind, solar, biomass and geothermal, the report said.

Tapping just 5 percent of these renewable resources could equal the output of 16 coal-fired, 500-megawatt plants, according to the report.

“The technology does exist today to make that happen,” Nielsen said.

Expanding transmission lines and finding ways to integrate the resources into the grid will be a challenge, he said.

Environmental Defense’s report comes out days before the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, established by the World Meteorological Organization of the United Nations, releases findings that will assess drivers, effects and future projections of climate change.

Vickie Patton, senior attorney for Environmental Defense, said she expects the IPCC’s report, due out Friday, to say that climate change is happening in the West and its being caused by people.