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## SMOKE ON THE WATER

*Nationwide, coal-fired power plants appear to be on the way out. But in southwest Arkansas—next to some of the finest fish and wildlife habitat anywhere—one may be on the way in.*

**By Ted Williams**

Audubon, January/February 2008

"Should America place a moratorium on coal-fired power plants?" I inquired of environmental attorney Rick Addison. He answered with an emphatic "No."

Addison represents four duck-hunting clubs in southwest Arkansas administratively contesting a proposal by American Electric Power (AEP) and its subsidiary in Arkansas, Louisiana, and northeast Texas—Southwestern Electric Power Company, or SWEPCO—to build a 600-megawatt, pulverized-coal plant in Hempstead County, 15 miles northeast of Texarkana. The site is close to some of the best fish and wildlife habitat in America, including a federal wilderness area, a national wildlife refuge, and 30,000 acres of interlocking flood-basin swamps, cypress brakes, bottomland hardwoods, savannas, and wet grasslands. Locals, who tend to be economically disadvantaged, generally see the project as a get-out-of-jail-free card. They call those who question it rich NIMBYs from away.

Addison continued: "We shouldn't have a moratorium on coal-fired power plants. We should never build another one. Pulverized coal [de rigueur, and a slightly more efficient fuel than whole coal] is not a ship we should launch into a 50-year night when its era is about over. Regardless of technology and permitting, it emits far too many pollutants. It's London 1880 brought forward in small increments to the 21st century."

Coal-burning plants are under assault all across America. Addison also represents environmental groups that sued Dallas-based energy corporation TXU for its plan to build 11 new pulverized-coal power plants in Texas. That ongoing action—along with public outrage and a \$32 billion private-equity buyout of TXU—has persuaded the owners to cancel eight of those plants. Last June Florida enacted a law requiring utilities to consider renewable energy sources and conservation programs in the permitting process for all new power plants. California and Washington have discouraged coal generation by prohibiting utilities from obtaining power from sources that pollute more than modern gas-burning plants. A year ago Oregon denied PacificCorp permission to charge consumers for costs of new coal plants outside the state. And last September Oklahoma denied an AEP subsidiary permission to build a coal plant in the northern part of the state.

In October AEP ended an eight-year court battle with eight eastern states, 13 environmental groups, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by agreeing to spend at least \$4.6 billion in pollution control and pay \$15 million in civil fines and \$60 million in cleanup and mitigation costs. The feds are calling it the largest environmental settlement in U.S. history.

Coal is expensive for the public as well as utilities, and costs are measured in more than just dollars. Coal-fired power plants are the worst industrial polluters in the United States, spewing something like a third of the carbon dioxide (the main agent of global warming) produced by industry, roughly 40 percent of the mercury (a deadly nerve poison), a quarter of the nitrogen oxides (a main agent of smog), and two-thirds of the sulfur dioxide (the main agent of acid precipitation). The EPA reports that sulfur dioxide aggravates heart disease and asthma, that nitrogen oxides damage lung tissue, and that, together, these pollutants form fine particles that do both.

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And yet American utilities are scrambling to build as many as 121 new coal plants. Why? With some of the data on global warming, including last summer's massive collapse of the Arctic ice cap and predictions that summer ice could disappear in 32 years, Congress is poised to control CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. And the utilities want to get as many plants grandfathered as possible.

They pulled this same stunt in 1977 when they talked Congress into exempting old plants from the Clean Air Act because they'd soon be "replaced." But rather than replace the old plants, they used them for more capacity, and many of them are still polluting. Under a program called New Source Review, utilities had to install the "best available retrofit technology" if they rebuilt or expanded a plant in ways that increased pollution. Instead they gained unfair cost advantages by implementing massive, enormously expensive modifications in their oldest, dirtiest facilities—thereby increasing both pollution and production—modifications they then passed off as "routine maintenance." The feds and states finally got fed up with the ruse and, in the late 1990s, sued 13 companies for illegally expanding, sans retrofits, 51 power plants in 12 states. This was part of the recent AEP settlement.

Still, AEP is as environmentally responsible as utilities get. In its hometown of Columbus, Ohio, it is helping transform the degraded Scioto riverfront into an attractive public park—just one of many examples. It invests heavily in energy-conservation promotion and provides incentives to reduce energy use. Throughout its 11-state service area, it makes a genuine effort to be a good neighbor. Could it be that the duck hunters and environmentalists in southwest Arkansas are fretting needlessly?

Absolutely, according to AEP and SWEPCO. Melissa McHenry, AEP's corporate media relations manager, informs me that one of the company's major problems is keeping wildlife, notably deer, away from its coal plants. "It [coal generation] doesn't have an impact," she says. "There's wildlife everywhere. You'll see cranes and egrets. The photographers can't believe it." And SWEPCO's president, Venita McCellon-Allen, assures me that "there's no reason the [Arkansas] plant can't fit in beautifully with the environment."

When I asked her about mercury, she said: "The amount of mercury distributed over the 18,000-acre intervener property [owned by the hunt clubs] over the life of the plant would be no more than the size of a golf ball. So there should be no concern." As "a prediction for the future" she cited the abundant wildlife at the 30-year-old Flint Creek coal plant in Gentry, Arkansas, where, inexplicably, SWEPCO plants food plots to bring in those pesky deer and where thermal pollution keeps a wastewater-retention basin ice free all winter and therefore attracts so many eagles, shorebirds, and wading birds that Audubon Arkansas has designated it an Important Bird Area (IBA). Finally, she explained that to help erase its carbon footprint, her company is doing things like planting trees in South America.

**I couldn't have agreed more with** McCellon-Allen when she described the Hempstead County Hunting Club's Grassy Lake as "absolutely beautiful." She had toured it on September 20, 2007, eight days before I did. The lake, more marsh than impoundment, is part of the pristine, wildlife-rich, 19,000-acre Little River Bottoms IBA—one of the largest contiguous tracts of fish and wildlife habitat on the Gulf coastal plain and virtually abutting the proposed coal-plant site.

I had the advantage of first seeing Grassy Lake in the pre-dawn under a nearly full moon. Piloting motorized pirogues were hunt club members Yancey Reynolds, a real-estate agent, and Johnny Wilson, a schoolteacher.

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Wilson guided Audubon Arkansas director of bird conservation Dan Scheiman, a member of the federal Ivory-billed Woodpecker Recovery Team. Audubon Arkansas executive director Ken Smith and I rode with Reynolds.

Moorhens bobbed through carpets of duckweed. Anhingas set their wings and glided toward open water. Roosting cattle egrets—strung across old-growth baldcypresses like Christmas popcorn—glowed in the moonlight. Wood ducks squealed, and tight formations of blue-winged teal rose, dipped, circled, and splashed. Two adult bald eagles, still hanging around their enormous nest, sculled off through the mist. Presently, the half-risen sun lit the wings of two roseate spoonbills—the first observed here by Audubon field personnel and thus the 128th species recorded at the site. Twenty-seven of those 128 species, including the wood stork and the endangered interior least tern, are considered by Audubon to be “birds of conservation interest,” meaning they’re in varying degrees of trouble. Ivory-billed woodpeckers occurred here historically, and unconfirmed sightings persist.

As the day warmed, squadrons of dragonflies appeared, and the head and snout of an alligator pushed up through the duckweed, looking so much like a log we debated which it was until it submerged. When the millinery trade threatened egrets in the early 20th century, Grassy Lake provided one of their last refuges. In the 1960s, when alligators had been extirpated from the rest of the state, Grassy Lake still sustained a viable population.

Hunt-club members are said by locals to be “rich,” which may be partially true by southwest Arkansas standards. They are said to be NIMBYs, which they admit. (“Not in this backyard,” exclaims Addison.) And they are said to be obsessed with ducks to the exclusion of the rest of creation, including people, which is false. Johnny Wilson responds to a public statement attributed to the Fulton fire chief that the plant is wanted “for our children and grandchildren” with: “We *don’t* want the plant, for exactly the same reason.” And when we encountered a rare spider orchid Reynolds and Wilson couldn’t contain their excitement. They and other members place screens around nests of alligator snapping turtles (endangered in fact, if not fiat) to protect the eggs from skunks and coons—this despite the fact that alligator snappers often prey on ducks. “I’m not mad at the birds; I just like to see them,” says Wilson, who has been coming to Grassy Lake since 1946, the year he was born, and whose great uncle was a charter member in 1897.

Grassy Lake and the forests and wetlands owned by five other local hunt clubs serve as a reservoir that provides the public with a steady flow of fish, wildlife, clean water, and clean air. In the 1970s the National Park Service wanted to make Grassy Lake a Natural National Landmark because it “contains the finest example of a sizeable stand of virgin baldcypress in Arkansas.” It would have done so had not hunt-club members feared a tourist invasion.

More remarkable than the NIMBYism is the fact that the hunt clubs have been able to protect these 18,000 acres since the 19th century. Another Hempstead County Hunting Club member, Mary O’Boyle, is the great-granddaughter of the club’s founder, William Buchanan, a distant relative of the President and a lumber and railroad baron. “Even though he was cutting down every other tree on the planet,” she says, “he realized what a special place this was and that this kind of habitat needed to be preserved. On his deathbed he had friends place a mattress in a canoe and take him out onto Grassy Lake so he could see it one last time.”

Fifteen miles north of the proposed coal-plant site is the Pond Creek National Wildlife Refuge, 27,500 acres of mature bottomland hardwoods, oxbow lakes, rivers, and cypress sloughs. Forty miles north of that is the 14,460-acre Caney Creek Wilderness of the Ouachita National Forest. But not a lot of coal-plant proponents are much into sloughs, swamps, or wild forests.

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**SWEPCO, which is hawking the** project as economic elixir, has found a rapt audience in Hempstead County, where 18.8 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. In December 2006 the company announced that the plant would create an annual payroll of \$12 million in jobs. The following September, having fomented 10 months of celebration, it allowed that maybe the figures would be more like \$9 million in direct and indirect jobs.

I asked vocal proponent Mike Cox, who owns a liquor store in Miller County just over the Hempstead County line, why he supported the project. "I feel it will benefit our economy," he declared. Was he worried about pollution? "No," he said. "This plant should be more technologically advanced than the one in Gentry. They have walking trails up there. They have an eagle lookout. They have a lake. I'd estimate that 80 to 90 percent of the people around here are for the new plant. Most of the state senators and representatives from our area are for it. The opposition is a small but very wealthy minority. They are spending big bucks on high-powered attorneys trying to stop this. And they've done a real good job. I think they have ntpicked SWEPCO to death."

Hempstead County is dry, so provided you follow SWEPCO procedure and don't figure in any of the real costs (such as damage done by stack emissions to human health), the collective thirst of construction workers will indeed "benefit the economy," especially Cox. He also has it right about the proposed plant being "technologically more advanced." According to current construction plans, it will involve what AEP calls "ultra-supercritical" generation, unproven but which supposedly is marginally more efficient. Local proponents are much impressed. Addison guffaws. "When are they going to run out of adjectives?" he asks. Reynolds expects the next increment to be "ultra-magnificent-supercritical."

Possibly Cox and his allies would be more concerned about pollution if they consulted a source other than SWEPCO. Even if the firm's claim that mercury falling on hunt-club property "would be no more than the size of a golf ball" were correct (it isn't, because the calculation relies on a prevailing wind direction of northwest, exactly opposite of what it really is), McCellon-Allen is wrong in her proclamation that "there should [therefore] be no concern." A little mercury is a lot. That's why health advisories for, say fish, are calibrated in parts per billion. When mercury hits water, bacteria transform it to methylmercury—a neurotoxin that magnifies in the food chain like DDT, destroying nerve tissue, especially in young children and fetuses. Symptoms include loss of hearing, memory, and balance as well as slurred speech and blurred vision. What's more, the acid precipitation produced by coal plants mobilizes naturally occurring soil-bound mercury. Regardless of how much mercury the coal plant will or won't dump on hunt-club property, it will annually belch out 300 pounds.

Mercury and other coal-plant emissions, such as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, are no less dangerous to fish and wildlife than to humans, causing direct and indirect mortality by reducing species diversity, population density, reproductive capacity, immunity to disease, and food supply. By eliminating insect predators, coal pollution has caused irruptions of insect pests. Acid precipitation from coal pollution kills aquatic organisms and reduces and/or weakens species that depend on them—fish-eating birds and mammals, for instance. Power lines fragment habitat, encourage the growth of invasive exotic plants, and kill birds directly. In one study a coal plant's power line that crossed a water body was seen to kill between 200 and 400 waterfowl in a single autumn.

**Documents, statements, and behavior** issuing from SWEPCO and its parent, AEP, suggest a company madly rushing to beat impending carbon regulations. Consider the environmental-impact statement (EIS) required by

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Arkansas law. SWEPCO's ignores the no-action alternative—a fatal flaw. And in some 350 pages (not counting attachments) there are less than three pages of alternatives analysis and no environmental analysis of alternative sites or cumulative impacts like offsite pollution. Impacts on endangered species are not considered.

So deficient is the document that the Arkansas Public Service Commission has twice criticized it in writing. Also criticizing the EIS have been the Department of Arkansas Heritage and the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The EPA has informed SWEPCO that it won't approve the project until the company demonstrates that it can't build the plant somewhere else where it wouldn't dewater, pollute, and otherwise harm as many wetlands, and until it demonstrates it has no choice but to degrade public land sensitive to air pollution. The Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality has not issued an air-pollution permit. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has not issued a 404 (wetlands) permit.

Why did AEP elect to build a mammoth coal-fired power plant next to the wildlife-rich river bottoms and swamplands of southwest Arkansas? "There were a lot of reasons," avers McCellon-Allen. "The site has the water and the rail access we needed. It's in an area that needs additional generation, and there was significant support from the community leaders in that area."

The last of those reasons seems to have weighed most heavily. The two tiny settlements involved—McNab and Fulton—are outside the jurisdiction of any municipality and primarily low income and minority, with scant resources or inclination to mount a political challenge. Rail access is present but dilapidated, water access—with endangered species and wetlands issues—problematic. Transmission capacity is grossly inadequate.

Incredibly, the site was chosen without anyone from the consulting team AEP had retained to do the selection study ever laying eyes on it. When I asked McCellon-Allen where the Hempstead site alternative finished in the ranking study, she said, "Of course, you've been coached by another party or you wouldn't have asked that question." But I hadn't been coached. In the course of my research I'd learned that the site was low on the list, and I was merely seeking accurate figures. I had to acquire them elsewhere.

In the 27-criteria selection study, conducted by an independent contractor, the Hempstead site finished seventh out of 10. Later, when the study was expanded to include Texas, it finished ninth out of 12. The study examined sites on two levels—"must criteria," which had to be satisfied or the site would be rejected, and "want criteria," which would merely be nice to have. The "must criteria" included the stipulation that the site not be within 100 kilometers (about 60 miles) of what the Clean Air Act designates a Class 1 Area. But the Caney Creek Wilderness of the Ouachita National Forest is a Class 1 Area, and it's 90 kilometers away.

"I think AEP came down here to exploit what is one of the more remote and desperate areas in Arkansas," offers Hempstead County Hunting Club member Willis Smith. "I don't believe they had any idea they were going to run into the environmental issues that they did. I think they thought it was going to be the easiest place they could go."

With Audubon Arkansas' Ken Smith and Dan Scheiman, I visited other beautiful and productive fish and wildlife habitat near the proposed site—for example, the Millwood Lake IBA, where great and snowy egrets adorned baldcypresses older than our nation and stalked mudflats two miles out, showing in the shadows of thunderheads and drowned timber like marshmallows strewn on asphalt. Ospreys and Caspian terns patrolled open water. In the Little River, below the dam, two fishermen were cleaning up on white bass and channel catfish. Yellow mayflies swarmed around us, and turtles (red-eared sliders, as far as we could determine) drifted in the slow, nearshore current.

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At the Game and Fish Commission's Grandview Prairie Wildlife Management Area, part of another IBA, we inspected perhaps the most endangered habitat in the nation—blackland prairie, an important sanctuary for grassland birds.

West of Grassy Lake, Yellow Creek Hunting Club member Dick Broach guided us up a wide, slow flow teeming with wading birds, turtles, alligators, and enormous largemouth bass. Broach, a fisheries biologist who retired in 1997 after bootstrapping his way to deputy director of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, didn't strike me as "rich" any more than did Yancey Reynolds, Johnny Wilson, or Willis Smith (also self-made men). But in southwest Arkansas, national norms don't apply.

"We're very apprehensive about mercury," Broach remarked. "And we're worried about all the rail traffic. There will be spillage, and the transmission corridor will cut through old-growth cypress on one side or old-growth bottomland hardwoods on the other. I don't see how this can possibly survive a challenge in a court of law. I hope it doesn't have to go that far."

Where the creek started to narrow, Broach beached his aluminum motorboat, and we stepped into a wet, fragrant forest of Osage orange, towering shagbark and water hickories, cottonwoods, and oaks. As we hiked, we talked about fish, wildlife, and the future.

When I asked what the chances are that the environmental community and the hunt clubs could stop the coal plant, Ken Smith said, "I'd say we have a 50/50 chance. Before the Arkansas Public Service Commission began its hearings in August, I think our chances were well below that. But the governor has appointed two commissioners, including a new chairman. Since then the commission has raised such issues as mercury, carbon, habitat, and even IBAs."

America needs more energy but not more coal energy. There are all manner of alternatives, not the least of which is not wasting energy—a strategy we have never tried. "We should look at available gas," says Addison. "There are gas plants that are mothballed or used for different functions. We should look at other power plants that for one reason or another are not online, or operating below capacity. We should look at renewable energy and energy conservation. There is no reason to build another coal plant anywhere. And each one we build we'll regret 30 years from now."

The tenure of most corporate executives and elected officials is less than a decade, so few care what happens 30 years hence. But if state and federal regulators allow AEP to build its proposed coal plant, there will be people doing even more regretting than hunt-club members. They will be the children whose lives local politicians and their constituents say they're seeking to improve.

*Ted Williams's opinion column has been a leading independent voice of environmental journalism for 20 years.*

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## WHAT YOU CAN DO

In late November, as *Audubon* was going to press, the Arkansas Public Service Commission approved SWEPCO's plans. Audubon Arkansas and other groups will continue to fight the plant. If you would like to help, send checks, endorsed to the Little River Bottoms Defense Fund, to **Audubon Arkansas**, 201 East Markham Street, Suite 450, Little Rock, AR 72201.