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Don't delay public review process: activists

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The health of children and emissions into the environment should be considered by the public before the testing of petroleum coke at the Coleson Cove generating plant begins, says the Saint John chapter of the Conservation Council of New Brunswick.

"The particulate (small dust-like matter) is so damaging to the health of our children, it is absolutely abominable that they would knowingly burn something that lodges into the lungs of our children and causes respiratory failure," council member Patty Donovan told reporters Tuesday.

NB Power is seeking approval from the Department of Environment to begin a 12-month pilot project that will see the burning of a mixture of heavy fuel oil and petroleum coke, a coal-like residue created during the petroleum refining process, in one boiler unit at its largest power plant. The change is intended to reduce the high fuel costs the utility has faced in the wake of a failed Orimulsion deal with Venezuela's state-owned oil company.

But NB Power Generation, which runs the utility's 14 power plants in the province, wants to delay the second part of the environmental assessment process, including the public review and meetings.

David Thompson, director of the conservation council in Saint John, said the environmental process is not good as it is and the idea that part of it could be delayed until after the testing is ridiculous since the health, air quality and environment of the public will be affected.

"We are requesting that they be public meetings in the community where people can get together discuss this and ask questions and we will accept no less," said Thompson.

"If they (the provincial government) refuse to do it, we will. This is going to be the mark of the new government and environment minister in the province to see whether they put it through the process or short circuit it in the early stages and let the decision be made by the minister without proper discussion."

Darrell Bishop, vice president of NB Power Generation, said the corporation has asked the government to delay the second part of the environmental assessment until the test project has been completed to save time and taxpayers' money. He said it plans to have a public meeting on Feb. 23 at the Holiday Inn Express in Saint John from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. to hear concerns and answer questions.

"We are going to meet with the public and we will meet with them. I don't know what they can tell people," said Bishop. "They don't have any results, they have a lot of generic studies saying there are health problems but it is irresponsible reporting because they don't know the conditions it was burned under. Maybe those plants did not have the scrubbers and precipitators that we bought and paid for."

Bishop said NB Power Generation wants to wait until the testing has been done to present results and real studies to the public for consideration. He said doing the public environmental process would delay the project another two to three years, causing taxpayers more money.

But Thompson said it isn't reasonable to think an adequate environmental process will take place after New

Brunswick's money has already been spent to get the project established.

He also reminded reporters of an incident that happened in 1990 in Saint John when petroleum coke was brought in on a ship and blew all over the city's West Side, causing some health problems and film on people's property. He said it was important for people to know that the pet coke will be shipped into the port and transported to Coleson Cove with the possibility of dust flying into the air. Bishop ensured this would not be a problem. He said the pet coke is in clumps the size of coal and will be covered and enclosed at all times.

"It will never see the air," he said.

The conservation council also had concerns about greenhouse gases and climate change. Council member Rob Moir said with a recent United Nations study calling for a decrease in emissions, it would be irresponsible to burn pet coke which adds to greenhouse gases.

Bishop agreed that climate change is something every person should think about every day. He said the worst scenario is that the pet coke will create four to five per cent more greenhouse gases than are created now. He said the cost to the environment will be offset by wind-powered projects NB Power is planning and is therefore worth the five per cent people will likely save on their electric bills.

"Pet coke is produced by refineries more and more, and it will be burned by somebody, make no mistake in that," said Thompson. "Climate change is a global issue and whether it's burned in China or New Brunswick, it will be burned; at least we can control how we will burn it."

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