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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Study: Southern Company plants are 3 biggest greenhouse gas emitters

Related

By David Ibata

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Two Southern Company coal-fired electric generating plants near Atlanta are the biggest contributors to global greenhouse gases in the United States, and a third Southern plant in Alabama is the third-biggest emitter, an analysis of environmental data found Wednesday.

The nation's No. 1 producer of carbon dioxide -- the heat-trapping gas that is held chiefly responsible in models of global warming -- is Plant Scherer in Juliette, about 65 miles southeast of downtown Atlanta, according to the Associated Press analysis of data reported to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for 2010.

The No. 2 producer is Plant Bowen, just west of Cartersville, about 50 miles northwest of central Atlanta, and the third-largest is Plant Miller in Quinton, Ala., about 165 miles west of Atlanta near Birmingham, the AP said.

In a prepared statement emailed to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Atlanta-based Southern said, "The emissions reported for Plants Scherer, Bowen and Miller are indicative of those being among the nation's largest generators of electricity."

"Southern Company complies with all environmental regulations and supports transparency in emissions reporting," the

utility said. "The company is a leader in environmental research, development and implementation."

Southern pointed out that it is managing the U.S. Department of Energy's National Carbon Capture Center in Alabama and is participating in studies with the federal government to develop technologies to capture emissions, reducing their presumed impact on the environment.

But environmental watchdogs say utility companies need to do more.

"The United States as a nation has yet to formally address climate change in the ways that are necessary to meet the seriousness of the problem," Stephen Smith, executive director of Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, told the AJC in a phone interview.

"When it comes to reducing CO2 emissions, [Southern] ... is spending a lot of money lobbying Congress," Smith said. "It shows they have a lot at stake, and instead of being proactive, their response is to continue sweeping the problem under the rug."

Southern spent \$8.3 million on lobbying during 2011, according to a public records website operated by the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan nonprofit that researches public spending and lobbying in Washington.

"Companies like Southern have known for decades that they are contributing to the pollution that's causing global warming," said David Doniger, policy director of the climate program at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

"They need to cut back their carbon pollution, diversify how they produce electricity, to do it more efficiently, adjust the efficiency in the way electricity is used in homes and businesses, and to generate it from cleaner sources," Doniger said.

Smith said Southern "should be much more aggressive in retiring elements of their coal fleet and trying to find cleaner ways to generate." And not just with nuclear power, as at the utility's Plant Vogtle near Augusta, but with such energy sources such as solar, wind and biomass, Smith said.

Power plants released 72 percent of the greenhouse gases reported to the EPA for 2010, according to the information released Wednesday that was the first catalog of global warming pollution by facility. The data include more than 6,700 of the largest industrial sources of greenhouse gases, or about 80 percent of total U.S. emissions.

According to the AP analysis, 20 mostly coal-fired power plants in 15 states account for the top-releasing facilities.

American Electric Power, another large coal-fired power producer, has three power plants in the top 20. They are in Rockport, Ind., Cheshire, Ohio, and St. Albans, W. Va.

"This is just another way to identify the largest coal-fired power plants in the country," AEP spokesman Pat Hemlepp told the AP. "We always assumed we would be No. 1 in greenhouse gas emissions or No. 2 behind Southern Co. Us and Southern are the two largest consumers of coal."

The other states with high-polluting power plants are Texas, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Wyoming, North Carolina, Kansas and Kentucky.

Refineries were the second-largest source of greenhouse gas emissions, with 5.7 percent of the reported total. The top states in emissions from power plants and from refineries were Texas, Pennsylvania, Florida, Ohio, and Indiana.

Congress required industries to report their emissions as part of a 2008 spending bill. Until now, the agency has estimated greenhouse gas emissions by industry sector.

Gina McCarthy, the top air official at the EPA, said the database marked "a major milestone" in the agency's work to address climate change. She said it would help industry, states and the federal government identify ways to reduce greenhouse gases.

The Obama administration plans to regulate emissions of heat-trapping gases under existing law. A proposed regulation to address pollution from new power plants could be released as early as this month. Eventually, the EPA will have to tackle facilities already in operation, with the largest emitters to be the first to face action.

-- The Associated Press contributed to this article.