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Coal plant will spew toxins

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As physicians, we have witnessed health trends and know that the growth in air pollutions is having a significant impact on public health. Many physicians practice based on two principles: "First do no harm" (the Hippocratic Oath), and prevention is more effective than a cure. We believe both of these apply to the proposed coal-fired power plant in Wise County -- preventing its construction would avoid serious air and water pollution problems in Southwest Virginia that would compromise public health.

Coal-fired power plants pose a major threat to public health. Yet, Dominion Resources is clearing land to build a new coal plant on the Clinch River. While Dominion suggests the proposed plant as a solution to increasing energy demands, the facility would create a host of new environmental and public health threats. The proposed plant would be a conventional coal-fired power plant, one that would spew out tons of pollutants that lead to asthma, heart attacks and even brain damage.

The daily stream of toxic nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds flowing from the plant would contribute to the formation of ground level ozone. These pollutants are known to contribute to asthma and chronic bronchitis, increased heart rhythm irregularities, chest pain episodes and fatal heart attacks. In addition, the particulates emitted by the facility are linked

with low birth weight and preterm births that can lead to other health problems and development delays in the first year of life. And of real concern to parents would be the large volumes of mercury that plant would

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release into the air and waterways of Virginia.

Power plant pollution continues to be a public health menace. A recent study by Abt Associates has demonstrated that nearly 24,000 people die each year in America because of particulate matter pollution from coal plants. This death toll exceeds the mortality from drunken driving (17,000 a year) and homicides (approximately 18,000 a year). More locally, coal plants in Virginia and those plants west (upwind) of the state contribute to deaths, which include 120 lung cancer deaths, 1,421 heart attacks and approximately 24,000 asthma attacks each year (catf.us).

The Wise County plant would add to the numbers of needless deaths and human suffering caused by coal plants in Virginia.

Coal-fired power plants are also the major source of the mercury in our food. Unborn children and infants are especially vulnerable to the toxic effects of mercury, which causes brain damage, learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that as many as 600,000 children are born each year with dangerous mercury levels in their bodies, most likely because their mothers ate contaminated fish while pregnant. The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality just this month released a report noting that 20 health advisories are posted for streams in the commonwealth because of mercury contamination in fish. Recreational anglers and subsistence fishermen are advised against consuming fish caught from these waterways.

Dominion's proposal seeks to release as much as 72 pounds of mercury each year, a much higher mercury release than other similar coal plants in operation and despite a ruling from the DEQ that suggests a release level of 8 pounds per year. Virginians should ask themselves, why should Dominion be granted authority to pollute our streams with nine times the allowable level of mercury?

Dominion cannot build the plant without air pollution permits from the Virginia Air Pollution Control Board. The board meets today to deliberate the issue. We encourage local residents and our colleagues in the medical and public health professions to make their voices heard by the board and by Gov. Tim Kaine. Don't allow this threat to the environment and public health to be constructed in the commonwealth.

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