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Proponents drop Avenal power plant project

Environmental groups opposed proposed power plant
Last year, a court ruled against Avenal Power Center LLC
Opponents said location was wrong for the area

By Lewis Griswold

A controversial power plant project near Avenal appears to be dead, and the news is being hailed by environmental groups as an outright victory.

A letter sent last week to the California Energy Commission by an attorney for Avenal Power Center LLC, based in Houston, states that the company will let the license for the project expire in September. The letter cited current energy needs in California and western states as among the considerations leading to the decision to drop the project.

First proposed in 2002, the project called for a 600-megawatt, natural gas-fired power plant near Avenal that would supply electric power to the California grid during times of peak demand.

Proponents said the power plant project would have created 500 construction jobs and 35 full-time positions. But Greenaction for Health & Environmental Justice, based in San Francisco, and other environmental advocacy groups opposed it and took it to federal court.

“We think the project is dead,” said Bradley Angel, executive director of Greenaction. “They had constant opposition.”

Greenaction, which already focused on nearby Kettleman City where a rash of unexplained birth defects garnered significant publicity, and other groups said the project was in the wrong location.

“Low-income people of color living near the proposed power plant are already burdened by birth defects and infant mortality, diesel traffic fumes, pesticides, and the largest toxic waste dump in the west,” he said, referring to the Waste Management landfill near Kettleman City a few miles from Avenal.

Four years ago, it appeared that the project might start construction when a federal judge ordered the Environmental Protection Agency to issue a construction permit.

But The Sierra Club, Greenaction, People for Clean Air and Water based in Kettleman City and another environmental group sued in federal court on grounds that emissions from the proposed plant would exceed federal guidelines.

Last year, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals sided with environmentalists and vacated the decision allowing the permit.

After the decision came down, Avenal Power told the energy commission it wanted a time extension to evaluate the project, and in December received a nine-month extension good until Sept. 16, 2015.