

# ...Union clashes with Sierra Club over Boardman closure

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gas, both fossil fuels. Coal is the dirtier of the two, in terms of emissions.

Boardman was sited and permitted in 1975, before the Clean Air Act began to take effect, but the law is catching up. The federal law requires power plants to progressively lower emissions like SO<sub>x</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub>, and mercury. The problem for PGE is that retrofitting Boardman to comply with the law would cost, all told, about \$500 million. That cost calculation could lead the investor-owned utility to close Boardman.

If so, it would likely replace the coal plant with two new natural gas plants. That would mean construction jobs for union workers, and operating jobs for Local 125 members. One natural gas turbine has already been sited at the Boardman location.

But natural gas plants require fewer workers to operate — about 20, says Boardman operations manager Larry Smythe. So two such plants would require 40 workers, making most of Boardman's current staff of 110 redundant. And that's not counting the railroad and coal mining workers, nor the workers brought in to do scheduled maintenance during periodic plant shutdowns.

Workers at Boardman are pessimistic about the plant's long-term prospects.

"This place is gonna shut down," Scholl said — and with it, family-wage jobs. "This is about as good as it gets for a job in the trades," said Scholl, who previously worked union jobs in a paper mill and on a tugboat. Scholl, 37, supports his wife and two children on his earnings. But uncertainty about Boardman's future has prevented them from purchasing a home in nearby Hermiston.

Coal plants don't live forever. One way or another, Boardman will close. The debate is over when, and how.

Cesia Kearns wants Boardman to close as soon as possible. Since March 2009, Kearns has led the Sierra Club's "Beyond Coal" campaign to shut down Boardman.



**Marcy Putman, staff representative for International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 125, is on a mission to save the jobs of the 110 of her union's members who work at PGE's Boardman Coal Plant.**

"Coal is one of dirtiest sources of energy we have," Kearns says. "It's a 19th century technology."

Kearns describes Sierra Club's strategy to close Boardman as more like silver buckshot than a silver bullet. Sierra Club is party to a lawsuit against PGE. It organizes protest rallies and members testify at hearings of the Oregon Public Utilities Commission (PUC) and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), which enforces the Clean Air Act.

For Boardman to comply with the Clean Air Act, PGE will be required to install the "best available retrofit technologies." At a cost of about \$35 million, PGE will install new "low-NO<sub>x</sub>" burners next year that will reduce nitrogen oxide emissions by 46 percent. Then, a scrubber to reduce SO<sub>x</sub> emissions 80 percent would be installed in 2014, at a cost of \$270 million. Additional NO<sub>x</sub> controls would come in 2017.

PGE could spend all that money and continue to operate Boardman. But the company is concerned that costs associated with possible future carbon controls might make the plant too expensive to operate anyway. So PGE is proposing to close Boardman

voluntarily in 2020, and on that basis is asking DEQ for relief from the requirement to do the more expensive retrofits.

DEQ countered with three options: install just the low-NO<sub>x</sub> burners, and close in 2015; install the low-NO<sub>x</sub> burners, plus a cheaper SO<sub>x</sub> control system in 2014 for a 35 percent reduction, and close in 2018; or install the low-NO<sub>x</sub> burners, plus the \$270 million SO<sub>x</sub> scrubber in 2014, but avoid

the second phase of NO<sub>x</sub> improvements, and close in 2020.

A separate rule will require PGE to move forward to install technology to lower mercury emissions 90 percent by 2012. [Ironically, that will cause a waste disposal problem. Smythe, a former IBEW member, takes special pride in the plant's creative disposal of fly ash generated by coal combustion. Rather than being stored at an adjacent landfill, as originally planned, it's sold and used as an important ingredient in cement. But the mercury controls will render fly ash unusable for that purpose.]

The Sierra Club is sometimes a union ally, marching with Teamsters against NAFTA-style trade treaties, or partnering with Steelworkers in the Blue Green Alliance. In Northeast Portland, Sierra Club is making its member list available to organizers who are signing up homeowners for energy retrofits done by union-signatory contractors. Kearns herself is recording secretary of the Sierra Club's staff union.

But at Boardman, Sierra finds itself at odds with a union — Local 125. Just as Kearns serves Sierra Club members by working to close Boardman, Local 125 staff representative Marcy Putman serves her members by working to save

it. It's also personal: Her father-in-law worked at Boardman.

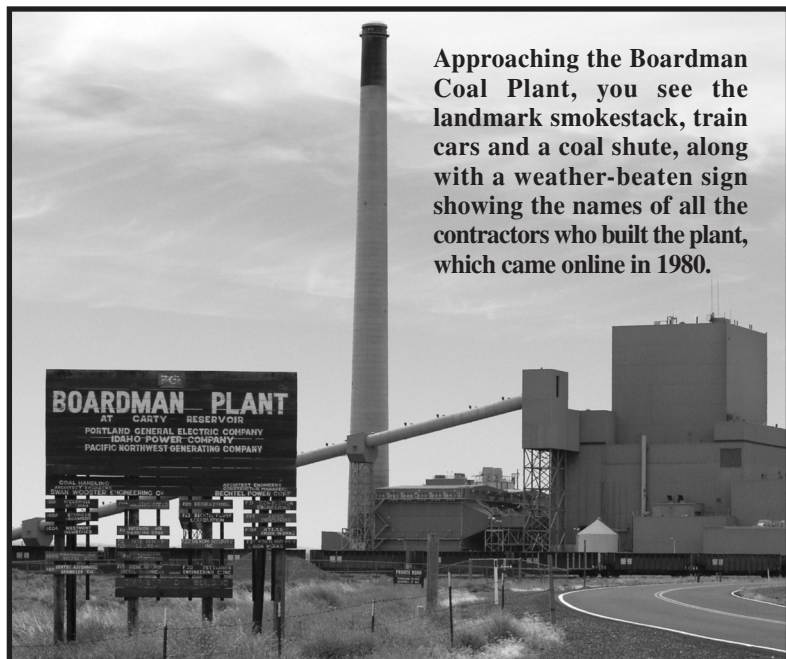
While Kearns works to mobilize Sierra Club members to write letters and attend hearings, Putman works tirelessly on the other side, visiting and calling Local 125 members and their families to make sure their voices are also heard by PUC and DEQ. Decisions by those two agencies will guide PGE's decision on whether or when to close the plant.

Over 400 people turned out at a June 23 PUC hearing in Portland. PGE brought in workers from Boardman, but the testimony was overwhelmingly from environmentalists in favor of closing the plant, including Portland Mayor Sam Adams.

"It seemed like good versus evil, truth versus lies," said Boardman employee David Mabbott, who attended the hearing. "Their side was based largely on emotion."

On Aug. 16, PUC will hold another hearing, this time in Boardman. Putman expects there the commissioners will hear a different tune; Local 125 is calling on members to show up at that meeting.

In September, the Oregon DEQ will take public comment on the various closure options. It will issue a final decision in December.



Approaching the Boardman Coal Plant, you see the landmark smokestack, train cars and a coal chute, along with a weather-beaten sign showing the names of all the contractors who built the plant, which came online in 1980.

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