



Cesia Kearns (left) and Robin Everett are leading the Oregon Sierra Club's campaign to rid the state of coal-fired power plants.

PHOTO BY MARA GRUNBAUM

Environmentalists charge up to challenge coal

The Oregon Sierra Club's newest campaigners talk with Street Roots about federal policy, local activism and what lies ahead

BY MARA GRUNBAUM
STAFF WRITER

Cesia Kearns and Robin Everett came to Oregon with a purpose: to scrub the state clean of coal power. Coal-burning plants provide about half of the country's energy — in Oregon it's just over 40 percent. Though it's relatively abundant in the U.S. and often costs less than other energy sources, burning coal releases high levels of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. The Sierra Club hopes to see more renewable energy sources, like wind and solar power, take the place of coal nationwide.

Though they're new to Portland, both Everett and Kearns have a history of environmental activism. Everett started as a volunteer for the Sierra Club and has worked for the organization for two years, most recently helping to fight the planned construction of a toll road through a state park in California. After a lengthy legal battle, the project was blocked in December.

Kearns worked for over four years for the Sierra Club in Minneapolis, where she focused on energy issues. Among other projects, she worked to prevent the expansion of the Big Stone coal plant on the Minnesota-South Dakota border. That proposal is still up in the air.

Trying to reshape Oregon's energy picture will take time, but Kearns and Everett have an immediate agenda too.

In April, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed that the emissions that cause climate change — carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases — directly threaten human health and safety. That may not seem like breaking news to entrenched environmentalists, but if the EPA's findings are adopted, the agency would have authority to regulate the gases more strictly as pollutants.

Before the proposal can move forward, the EPA is holding two public hearings, where they will take comments on their plan. One hearing will take place in Arlington, Va., on May 18, and the other will be in Seattle on May 21. Kearns and Everett hope to bring busloads of Oregonians to the Seattle hearing to testify and rally in support of the EPA's plan.

Everett and Kearns recently sat down with Street Roots to discuss their coal campaign and the atmosphere for environmentalism today.

Mara Grunbaum: Why are you focusing on coal?

Cesia Kearns: We've been working on air quality issues for years, but a few years back it became abundantly clear to the Sierra Club that if we have any hope of solving global warming, then we really need to not be building any new coal-fired power plants, and we also have to look at existing ones and transition away from them.

When the Bush administration came in, there were a lot of loopholes in policies that were meant to control air emissions. Cheney's energy plan basically called for building more coal-fired power plants. Developers took advantage of that, and all these new proposals started coming up — mostly around the Midwest, but all over the country. There were over 150 new coal-fired power plant proposals in the past 8 years or so. Sierra really embarked on trying to stop those proposals through both grassroots organizing and our legal strategies. Now we've defeated 97 proposals of those 150. That's been pretty exciting.

Now we're looking at phase two, which is, how do we move away from the existing sources (of pollution)?

If we're going to be successful anywhere, the Northwest is the place because of what has yet to be tapped in terms of efficiency and renewables, and the kind of energy we have right now. This is one spot where it's really possible.

There have been some other places in the country where there's been some repowering of plants. In Minnesota there were three plants that were repowered with natural gas, so that was a huge victory. Here in Oregon, we've got some pretty unique opportunities coming up this year.

Robin Everett: The Northwest is a great place to start this project, because the people here really value conserving the environment. Part of our power here in the Northwest is not only the great energy mix, but the great people mix.

A lot of people are surprised to find out that 41 percent of our energy comes from coal in Oregon. We have an opportunity to educate people on that fact, and there's decision-making happening that can shift that 41 percent to a lower percentage.

PGE is doing their "Integrated Resource Plan" — they're going to develop their plan for the next five years on where they're getting their energy and how they're producing it. It has to be approved by the Public Utilities Commission. We have an opportunity to say, "Hey, we want you to stop using coal. We want you to shift over into renewables." We're going to work on getting people to write comments and attend hearings and show PGE and the PUC that we're looking to get off of coal.

Additionally, the Northwest Planning and Conservation Council will be doing their 20-year plan this year, so again, we're looking to tell them we don't want to be on coal anymore.

In those two respects, we have a huge opportunity to be very influential in how the future of energy is here in Oregon and the Northwest.

M.G.: So what are you specifically trying to do?

R.E.: There's one plant in Oregon — the Boardman coal plant run by PGE. We're looking at what it takes to shut that down at some point in the near future. We're looking at a number of different avenues, and also looking to be part of solutions, too. Things like SolarWorld and new wind will help move beyond coal.

C.K.: Then there's all of the imported coal-fired power. We get a certain percentage of our electricity from PGE's Boardman plant, but we're also importing coal-fired power from Montana and Wyoming. Oregon can't say we're totally renewable energy — clean and green! — when we shut down Boardman, because rate-payers are still consuming coal-fired electricity. That's a little bit more complicated, because it's not just shutting down one plant. But that's all about that regional planning. If we have regional decision-making bodies saying (energy companies' plans) need to reflect electricity generation without coal, then that's the ideal that we're moving forward. Right now, none of those companies have maximized energy efficiency or renewable options in

For more information on Sierra Club's coal campaign, see <http://oregon.sierraclub.com/coal>