

PacifiCorp releases plan to cut coal power and add renewables

By CASSANDRA PROFITA
Oregon Public Broadcasting

On Thursday, PacifiCorp released a 20-year power plan that cuts back on coal and adds renewable wind and solar energy.

The Portland-based utility serves 1.9 million customers across six western states, including Oregon and Washington, and right now more than half of its power comes from coal.

Environmental groups have been pressing PacifiCorp for years to close more of its coal plants sooner and speed up its transition to renewable energy. But leaders in states like Wyoming, where the utility's coal plants are stationed, say the company would be hurting local economies and betraying their trust by closing coal plants early.

The investor-owned utility is planning to shutter more than 75% of its coal fleet by 2038, cutting nearly 4,500 megawatts of coal-fired power at multiple plants in Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Idaho and Utah.

Only a portion of the closures would come sooner under the new plan than they would have otherwise. The company is calling for the early retirement of seven coal units at five different plants, with some closures coming more than a decade ahead of schedule.

In a statement, Chad Teply, PacifiCorp's senior vice president for business policy and development, said the company is aware that the early retirements will cut jobs at its

coal plants.

"We are mindful that these resource decisions impact our thermal operations employees, their families and communities," he said. "Our top priority is making certain our employees and communities remain informed about the changes ahead and that we work in concert with everyone involved to develop plans that help them transition through this time of change."

Company officials estimated the new plan will save \$300 million to \$500 million in operation costs and will offer the lowest power rate option for PacifiCorp customers.

Rick Link, PacifiCorp's vice president of resource planning and acquisitions, said cost calculations played a big role in the company's decision to reduce its generation of coal-fired power.

"Coal generation has been an important resource in our portfolio, allowing us to deliver reliable energy to our customers, and will continue to play an important role as units approach retirement dates," he said in a statement. "At the same time, this plan reflects the ongoing cost pressure on coal as wind generation, solar generation and storage have emerged as low-cost resource options for our customers."

On a press call following PacifiCorp's announcement, Link said the company's analysis shows closing too many coal plants too soon could create problems for the reliability of the grid and the capacity of the entire system to generate enough energy for all of its customers.

Oregon mostly spared from wildfires

By KALE WILLIAMS
The Oregonian

Sometimes the absence of something can make a bigger impact than its presence. For the summer of 2019 in Oregon — a time of year marked recently by blankets of smoke, warnings about unhealthy air and evacuation notices — that absence came as a literal breath of fresh air.

In 2017, more than 1.1 million acres were scorched by wildfire in Oregon and Washington. 2018 was even worse, with 1.3 million acres of forest and fields going up in flame. That's an area close to the size of Delaware up in smoke each year.

This year was a much different story: Just over 200,000 acres were scorched across both states, a nearly 84% drop from the two previous years.

"Our weather was closer to what weather typically looks like in Oregon and Washington," said John Saltenberger, fire weather program manager, Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, which coordinates firefighting resources for Oregon and Washington. He noted that 2019 wasn't exceptionally cool or wet, just that our last few fire seasons had seen temperatures well above average.

"Our expectations have become a bit warped," he said.

The mild wildfire season saved Northwest firefighting agencies a boatload of money, too. Fighting wildfires cost Oregon and Washington more than a \$1 billion in 2017 and 2018 combined, according to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center. In 2019, both states spent less than \$100 million, a 92% drop in costs.

Calm conditions, aggressive attack

Much of the quiet season can be attributed to weather. The relatively cool tempera-



Kelly Yan

The Milepost 97 fire burned more than 13,000 acres along Interstate 5 south of Canyonville this summer, but was one of the few fires that significantly impacted the public.

tures kept fuels in forests and grasslands from drying into the tinderboxes they were in recent years. Temperatures remained lower than in 2017 and 2018, and humidity stayed high enough to keep fuels moist. Lightning, when it did come through, was often followed by rain.

Fire experts measure fire danger in a number of ways, including temperature, humidity, wind speed, sunlight and how much fuel is on the landscape. One of those measurements is called Energy Release Component, essentially the amount of energy that will be released when fuels burn. Because of the weather, Saltenberger said, that number stayed low for much of the summer.

The number of fires that started weren't that much lower this year than last — 3,038 compared to 3,914 — but the lower potential for explosive growth meant they didn't spread nearly as fast. Smaller fires demand fewer resources, leaving more firefighters free to position themselves around the state, able to jump into action more quickly and get to new starts before they grew.

"We saw very fast initial attack," said Bobbi Doan, a spokeswoman for the Oregon Department of Forestry, the agency charged with

fighting fires on state land. "We had lightning touch every part of the state, but we had crews prepositioned to get to fires quickly."

The shortest season in 20 years

The start and end of fire season in Oregon is declared district-by-district, depending on fuel conditions. The Southwest Oregon District, covering Josephine and Jackson counties, was the last district to see conditions ripe for wildfire. With the arrival of rain, cooler temperatures and shorter days, officials there declared the season over on Tuesday, according to the state.

At just 99 days, it was about three weeks shorter than the average fire season, the agency said, and the shortest season they've seen since the turn of the century.

That's not to say the state was bereft of blazes in 2019. The Milepost 97 Fire was sparked by an illegal campfire on July 24, and quickly grew to more than 10,000 acres. Given its proximity to Interstate 5, the conflagration produced dramatic

pictures as motorists and slowed traffic, at one point jumping the highway and burning through brush on both sides of the interstate. Hundreds were evacuated and the fire burned more than 13,000 acres before full containment was announced about three weeks after the initial spark.

The biggest fire in the state this year was much less visible. The Poker Fire, which was sparked by lightning on Aug. 15, burned more than 23,000 acres in Southern Oregon before it was fully contained in late September.

The calm conditions even allowed firefighters to let some fires burn. In Eastern Oregon, the strategy on the Granite Gulch Fire in the Eagle Cap Wilderness was changed from suppression to management, as the Statesman Journal first reported. Letting the fire burn come with risks. It can cause smoke and there's always a chance it could escape the boundaries firefighters set up, but if its managed effectively, it helps restore forest health and when fire passes through the area again, the area that burned this year will be less likely to roar into an uncontrollable blaze.

With the end of the official fire season, fire restrictions were lifted across the state, letting property owners burn debris piles and loosening restrictions on certain kinds of equipment that can start fires. It also means firefighting agencies can now focus their attention on fire prevention, conducting controlled burns where conditions allow, removing dead vegetation and helping landowners create defensible space around their homes.

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