

Would Tondu power plant trade health for jobs?

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[Michiana Point Of View](#)

By Kristin Shrader-Frechette

Carefully planned economic development would be good for St. Joseph County. One possibility is the Tondu Corp. coal gasification plant proposed for New Carlisle. It would bring both electricity and 70 new jobs. The plant, however, also would bring health costs.

Industry-reported data from the U.S. Toxics Release Inventory show that more cancer-causing chemicals are released in our area than anywhere in the United States. Scientists reporting T.R.I. data to the International Air Quality Board call our area the U.S. "Cancer Alley." This narrow corridor includes Michigan's southern border and runs east toward Cleveland. It receives one-third of all U.S. toxic chemicals.

Just the Michiana route, from Chicago to Elkhart, is home to 10 of the Great Lakes' Top 12 toxic polluters. T.R.I. data show that each year the United States releases eight pounds of toxins for every American. Indiana residents average almost three times that amount. St. Joseph County receives even more.

Could using Tondu's gasification technology, touted as "new" and "clean coal," help us? Yes, it might. The problem is that, despite gasification's benefits, it may not be clean enough for "Cancer Alley." Its costs and experimental nature may make using it -- here and now -- premature. In fact, high costs and pollution stalled gasification in the 1940s. Until then, it produced most gas for U.S. residential and commercial use. Classified by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control as "public-health hazards," old coal gasification plants are now monitored as hazardous-waste sites.

Although it is cleaner than conventional coal -- the dirtiest electricity source -- "clean-coal" gasification is not clean. Coal plants release more airborne pollutants. Gasification plants shift more pollutants to liquid and solid-waste streams, like the 440 tons of slag and heavy metals produced daily by a single plant.

While proponents correctly praise gasification for removing up to 90 percent of coal's mercury emissions, any mercury may be too much. Because there is no safe level of mercury, stricter regulations are making any mercury-emitting plant obsolete. One in eight American women of childbearing age already has blood-mercury levels high enough, according to 2004 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data, to cause neurological-developmental disorders in her unborn children.

Compared to a coal plant, the U.S. Department of Energy correctly says a "clean coal" gasification plant emits only 65 percent as many airborne particulates -- about 50,000 tons annually. Yet like mercury, no dose of particulates is safe. They cause cancer, heart attacks, asthma and other ailments. 2004 National Cancer Institute data show that every 0.000001-gram increase in particulates -- a few millionths of a gram -- causes an 18 percent increase in heart-attack fatalities.

Mercury and particulates aren't the only worries. The Department of Energy says "clean coal" gasification plants release more sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides than coal plants. For each trillion-BTU of coal used, DOE shows that a gasification plant releases hundreds of pounds each of dozens of toxic chemicals. These include carcinogens such as benzene, reproductive and neurological toxins like toluene, and metals like arsenic, cadmium and lead.

Its liquid wastes contain still other pollutants such as cyanide, chloride and sulfide. DOE says such releases are usually "less than 10 percent of the amount input to the gasifier." Yet, even such parts-per-million pollutants may be dangerous for an already-threatened area such as ours.

DOE says sulfuric acid releases from the American Electric Power "clean coal" plant in Cheshire, Ohio, sickened hundreds of citizens in 2001. AEP spent \$850 million trying to solve the problem and failed. In 2002 it bought the entire town and paid to move everyone out. In return, all residents had to agree not to sue AEP for their health problems.

When the U.S. General Accounting Office, the government's oversight agency, recently assessed U.S. "clean coal" facilities, it found that 62 percent had serious financial problems or delays up to seven years, and 15 percent went bankrupt. One example is the plant in West Terre Haute, Ind. -- idled by high costs and poor reliability.

Should Tondu use a partly-dirty, experimental technology with a poor history, especially since Tondu has no experience in gasification? Even proponents admit that gasification plants are 25 percent more expensive than coal, and likely to become more expensive. Within five years, some utilities say the United States will penalize facilities that cannot control carbon dioxide emissions. Yet the government insists that no commercial carbon-capture technology will be available for at least 20-30 years. If it is right, in five years ratepayers may bear additional carbon-dioxide penalties for building expensive, obsolete gasification plants. 2004 DOE data also show that energy from gasification, using experimental carbon-capture technology, costs twice as much as wind energy.

If the proposed plant is expensive and risky, why is Texas-based Tondu pursuing it? Tondu will not carry most of the risks. The 2005 U.S. energy bill gives large, inexpensive federal loans for experimental coal-gasification projects, provided the coal is "mined in the western United States." Tondu also will get large tax credits for experimenting with carbon-dioxide capture. If Tondu defaults, U.S. taxpayers would repay the loans and bear

most of Tondu's economic risks. In return for jobs and electricity, Indiana taxpayers would bear Tondu's health risks.

DOE says natural gas, cogeneration and wind are all cheaper and safer than gasification. If DOE is right, and if we are "Cancer Alley," the stakes may be too high not to examine these other technologies. Even promising technologies must be used in the right place at the right time.

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