

Farmers, pecan growers say coal plant kills plants

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BASTROP, Texas — Along a stretch of Highway 21, in a pastoral, hilly region of Texas, is a vegetative wasteland. Trees are barren, or covered in gray, dying foliage and peeling bark. Fallen, dead limbs litter the ground where pecan growers and ranchers have watched trees die slow, agonizing deaths.

Visible above the horizon is what many plant specialists, environmentalists and scientists believe to be the culprit: the Fayette Power Project — a coal-fired power plant for nearly 30 years has operated mostly without equipment designed to decrease emissions of sulfur dioxide, a component of acid rain.

The plant's operator and the state's environmental regulator deny sulfur dioxide pollution is to blame for the swaths of plant devastation across Central Texas. But evidence collected from the Appalachian Mountains to New Mexico indicates sulfur dioxide pollution kills vegetation, especially pecan trees. Pecan growers in Albany, Ga., have received millions of dollars in an out-of-court settlement with a power plant whose sulfur dioxide emissions harmed their orchards.

Now, extensive tree deaths are being reported elsewhere in Texas, home to 19 coal-fired power plants — more than any other state. Four more are in planning stages. In each area where the phenomenon is reported, a coal-fired power plant operates nearby.

The Fayette Power Project sits on a 10-square-mile site about 60 miles southeast of Austin, near where horticulturalist Jim Berry, who owns a wholesale nursery in Grand Saline, Texas, describes a 30-mile stretch of Highway 21 as a place where "the plant community was just devastated."

"There was an environmental catastrophe," Berry said recently.

"It wasn't just the pecan groves," he said after driving through the area. "It was the entire ecosystem that was under duress."

Pecan grower Harvey Hayek said he has watched his once-prosperous, 3,000-tree orchard in Ellinger, just south of the Fayette plant, dwindle to barely 1,000 trees. Skeletal trunks and swaths of yellowed prairie grass make up what had been a family orchard so thick the sun's rays barely broke through the thick canopy of leaves.

"Everywhere you look, it's just dead, dead, dead," Hayek said.

The grove that had produced 200,000 pounds of pecans annually yielded a mere 8,000 pounds this year. Hayek said as the family's business decreased, he watched his father-in-law, Leonard Baca, fade. Baca, 73, died after shooting himself in the head.

Retired University of Georgia plant pathologist Floyd Hendrix, who has done extensive research on sulfur dioxide damage to vegetation, said he has reviewed photographs and test results from Hayek's grove.

"From what I've seen so far, there's not any doubt in my mind that it's SO₂ injury," Hendrix said.

Sierra Club chemist and botanist, Neil Carman also has visited the ranch. Aside from the decreased nut production, the orchard's leaves bore telltale brown spotting associated with damage, Carman said.

Leo Lombardini, a horticulture professor at Texas A&M University who has visited Hayek's ranch, said he could not rule out water or soil issues causing the damage. However, he said, the ranchers in that area irrigated their orchards after being advised to do so by the university, so "in this case I don't think that was an issue."

Only extensive research would definitively prove whether pollution from the coal-fired power plant killed the trees in that area, Lombardini said.

"It is a reasonable assumption because we know that one of the byproducts of coal use and burning is sulfur and indeed sulfur is a pollutant and it causes damage to leaves," Lombardini said.

The Lower Colorado River Authority, which operates the Fayette plant, argues there is no scientific link between its emissions and the dying trees, noting the region also has suffered significant droughts.

But the authority is investing nearly \$500 million to install two "scrubbers" designed to decrease pollution. A third, newer boiler has a built-in scrubber. The equipment should be in

place by early 2011 and will decrease the plant's sulfur dioxide emissions by about 90 percent, said authority spokeswoman Clara Tuma.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality says air monitors indicate the Fayette plant "is not the likely cause" of the area's vegetative die-off. The plant operates under a state permitting program that was disapproved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in June. The EPA argues Texas' permits do not allow for accurate air monitoring and violate the federal Clean Air Act. Texas has challenged the disapproval in court.

The EPA's criminal investigation branch, meanwhile, has toured properties and interviewed pecan growers near Ellinger. The agency's civil division has been asked to review the information, according to e-mails obtained by The Associated Press. Other e-mails indicate the U.S. Department of Justice's environmental wing also investigated the matter, though a spokesman said he could not "confirm or deny" an ongoing probe.

The Fayette plant is far from a lone source of concern. From Franklin — a town about 100 miles north that is surrounded by coal-fired facilities — to Victoria — 80 miles to the south and near the Coletto Creek power plant — Texas ranchers say orchards and trees of all varieties are dying.

Charlie Faupel said his Victoria pecan trees are native plants that have grown along a creek bed for seven generations, supplementing a family income that also relied on cattle, real estate and publishing. When Faupel was a teenager, he would collect and sack the pecans, using the extra money to buy a car or go out.

Now, the few pecans that grow are bitter or thin.

On Dec. 9, Faupel filed a formal air pollution complaint against the Coletto Creek plant and demanded the state environmental commission investigate the emissions.

"I have noticed for over 20 years how the Coletto Creek power plant's sulfur dioxide has been damaging hundreds of the trees on our property — live oaks, white oaks and pecans," Faupel wrote. "Most of the white oak trees are already dead. The surviving trees don't have as much foliage and they're becoming more diseased, I believe, from the plant's sulfur dioxide weakening the trees over time."

The Coletto Creek Power Plant did not respond to repeated requests for comment. .

Faupel said some tree canopies recently appeared to be thickening and believes it's because Coletto Creek put a "bagging system" on its boilers, decreasing emissions. But the plant plans

to add a second boiler that is expected to add some 1,700 tons of sulfur dioxide pollution to the air annually.

"I'm not one of these fanatic environmentalists," Faupel said. "But when you are a seventh generation rancher, you are taught to be a good steward of the land . and you want the things on it, the cattle and the vegetation, to be healthy. And they're not."

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