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ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Massachusetts Regulators Approve a Gas-Fired Power Plant With an Expiration Date

By MATTHEW L. WALD FEB. 20, 2014

For years, proponents of natural gas, including President Obama, have promoted it as a “bridge fuel,” cleaner than coal but not clean enough to solve the climate problem. On Thursday, regulators in Massachusetts, in an unusual vote, put that theory into practice when it approved a new gas-fired power plant with only a limited life span.

In a hearing in Boston, a state siting board voted 5 to 0 to accept a proposal by a major New England environmental group and a company that wants to build the plant that would allow the plant to open, but require it to emit less and less carbon dioxide until it closed by 2050.

The Conservation Law Foundation and Footprint Power reached an agreement over a proposed \$800 million plant to be built in Salem Harbor, at the site of a coal plant that will shut this year. The new plant would generate 630 megawatts — although in later years, it would either have to limit its hours of operation, install carbon capture or make investments in renewable energy to stay under the declining emissions cap.

The agreement for progressively lower output and a definite retirement date is a first, according to Jonathan Peress, a vice president of the Conservation Law Foundation. Gas cuts carbon dioxide emissions by about half compared to coal, but it is still far too high in carbon to meet the ultimate climate emissions requirements, he said.

“We want gas to continue to displace coal,” he said. “We just don’t

want to worry that we're going from heroin to methadone.”

The agreement was submitted to the Massachusetts Energy Facilities Siting Board this week.

The plant is scheduled to open in 2016 and would operate normally until 2026, when progressively stricter limits would be imposed. In 2049, its last year of operation, its limit would be about one-quarter what it was in 2016.

Joining in the agreement was a state agency, the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, which promised that if the deal was approved, it would be written into the state-issued operating permit for the plant. The state would embark on a program to reduce leaks of unburned natural gas. Methane, the main ingredient of natural gas, is a potent global warming gas.

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