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Escanaba power plant orders more train loads of coal

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ESCANABA — Testing on burning a different type of coal at the Escanaba Power Plant went so well that seven more train loads of the coal have been ordered, officials announced Wednesday at the Electric Advisory Committee (EAC) meeting.

Because of a price hike in the Eastern coal, which the plant usually burns, and bankruptcy of the mine that had been sending coal to the city, a cheaper Western coal was tested in the facility's two boilers over the past month. After receiving a shipment of 16,000 tons of Western coal, power plant employees began a trial run of the coal April 13. The test burn went so well in boiler no. 1 the first week the Western coal was fed into the no. 2 boiler on April 20.

Electric Superintendent Mike Furmanski informed committee members Wednesday seven more train loads were ordered at \$95 a ton. The power plant had 30 days to test the coal at which time additional loads could be ordered or another coal source would have to be found.

Jerry Pirkola, plant operator, said, "Overall, I would say the test burn went very well." The visual air emissions were low and the heat rate was close to the Eastern coal, he said. The amount of ash was also very close to that of the Eastern coal, he added.

Because of the unexpected recent price increase in the Western coal, the city is proposing in its 2008-09 budget to use \$1.7 million from the electric fund to pay for the coal cost hike rather than raise electric rates. The budget is scheduled to be adopted at council's meeting tonight.

Six years ago, Western coal was tested at the plant because of its market price. The coal generated energy but wasn't cost effective because of the extra load on the precipitator. Since then, minor changes have been made in the air path in the boiler.

In other business, Furmanski said nine proposals were received on feasibility studies to convert the plant to burn a cheaper coal and/or convert the facility to burn biomass. Because of an aging 50-year-old plant, the city has been exploring various power supply options to meet an increasing energy demand.

Preliminary engineering design and cost estimates would assess the feasibility of converting the plant to burn Powder River Basin (PRB) coal or biomass, such as wood chips.

The committee granted administration an additional week, as requested, before making a decision on the proposals so a more realistic cost of delivering PRB coal to Escanaba could be determined. "Everything focuses on the PRB cost. That's a big piece of the puzzle right now," Furmanski said, anticipating the price of PRB coal to be in the range of \$53 a ton.

Council member Gilbert Cheves presented an update on a joint governmental committee's efforts in agreeing to cooperate in developing bio-industries in the county and participating in green programs. Once the resolution is in place, the committee plans to bring ideas to the EAC, he said.

Article Photos



Testing of new coal at the Escanaba Power Plant went well enough that seven more train loads of it have been ordered. The new coal is cheaper than the original coal burned due to a price hike. (Daily Press file photo)

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