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Fish kills cost region \$30 million annually Bay Shore plant in Oregon blamed



A reverse louver is hoisted by a crane at the Bay Shore power plant in an effort to reduce the number of fish kills in Lake Erie.
(THE BLADE)

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Northwest Ohio has been losing nearly \$30 million a year from FirstEnergy Corp.'s failure to reduce fish kills at its coal-fired Bay Shore power plant in Oregon, according to a study released yesterday that is believed to be the first of its kind.

The power station, which for 55 years has sat in the confluence of one of the Great Lakes region's most productive fish nurseries, is responsible for the deaths of as many as 60 million fish a year - 46 million adults and 14 million juveniles. Most of the deaths come from fish being slammed up against the plant's power intake screen or destroyed by being drawn into the facility, which operates in excess of 500 degrees.

The mortality figures were previously reported to the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency by FirstEnergy itself, after an extensive study of annual fish losses the federal government demanded in 2004 from all of the nation's 550 power plants.

But what never apparently had been quantified was what those losses meant in dollars to northwest Ohio's economy.

Several nonprofit groups campaigning for changes at the plant took it upon themselves to hire a consultant for \$25,000 for such a study to be done. The report, which took almost four months, cited \$29.7 million in annual losses.

"FirstEnergy has gotten away with massive fish kills scot-free for years," Sandy Bihn of the Western Lake Erie Waterkeepers Association said as she spoke to reporters on a conference call yesterday.

Her group is working in tandem with others - the Sierra Club, the Ohio Environmental Council, the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association, the Izaak Walton League of America, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and Ohio Citizen Action - in lobbying the state of Ohio for stricter controls. They split costs for the study.

Those groups would like to see FirstEnergy install a cooling tower. Such devices can reduce fish mortality by 95 percent and result in a milder thermal plume from the discharge, officials have said.

The utility has balked, citing costs upward of \$100 million.

Bay Shore is only a midsized facility, but kills more fish than all other Ohio power plants combined, the Ohio EPA has said.

"The Bay Shore plant is really a fish-killing machine," according to Shannon Fisk, a lawyer for the New York-based Natural Resources Defense Council, the nation's largest nonprofit group of environmental lawyers.

The Ohio EPA has tentatively agreed to let FirstEnergy try modernizing the facility with a set of screens known as reverse louvers. Such devices have had mixed results at dams and never have been used as fish barriers at coal-fired power plants.

Though unproven, they cost \$500,000 - a fraction of a cooling tower.

Mark Durbin, FirstEnergy spokesman, said the utility deserves the trial period it has been negotiating from the Ohio EPA to see if the devices can be effective at Bay Shore. The public comment period recently ended.

The Ohio EPA has said it likely will give FirstEnergy until Sept. 1, 2011, to study data generated by the pilot project. If the louvers pass that test, the utility will get until Oct. 1, 2014, to have its system in full operation, the agency has said.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources estimates that fishing has an \$800 million impact on Ohio's economy and that it supports 9,115 jobs.

During a recent visit to Maumee Bay State Park, Gov. Ted Strickland said he has become personally aware of the situation at the Bay Shore plant.

He said he agrees efforts need to be taken to enhance western Lake Erie's fishery, acknowledging its rising importance as the region attempts to diversify its economy with more tourism and recreation.

The governor said he was yielding to the Ohio EPA on the matter. His spokesman, Amanda Wurst, said last night he has not wavered from that position, though she also said he has not seen the latest study.

The study was performed by Gentner Consulting Group of Silver Spring, Md., with help from Mike Bur, a retired supervisor and fisheries biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey's Great Lakes Science Center in Ann Arbor. Brad Gentner, the consultant's president and chief economist, is a former senior research economist for the National Marine Fisheries Service. The report concluded that the amount of damage caused to the fishery "clearly supports the installation of cooling towers."

FirstEnergy questions the methodology of the study, Mr. Durbin said.

The utility has claimed that its Bay Shore power plant pumps \$100 million a year into the Toledo-area economy, and that it directly employs nearly 200 people.

According to Mr. Gentner, a nearly identical number of jobs could be created in other sectors of the economy if the region could recoup its \$30 million in annual losses from fish kills.

"The bottom line is we're working with the Ohio EPA to solve the problem," Mr. Durbin said.

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