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Congress of the United States
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IN EUROPE (U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)

May 11, 2022

Mr. Jeffrey J. Lyash
President and Chief Executive Officer
Tennessee Valley Authority
400 West Summit Hill Drive
Knoxville, TN 37902

Dear President Lyash,

We are at a critical juncture for deciding our energy future. Compounding crises speak volumes to the urgency with which we must transition away from fossil fuels and to an affordable, democratic, just and clean energy future. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accentuated the centrality of advancing energy independence. Skyrocketing gas prices that have saddled millions of households with utility debt highlights the need for affordable energy options. And intensifying climate disasters like the winter ice storm that pummeled Memphis's grid, leaving thousands of families without power for over a week, underscores the importance of a just transition to clean energy to build community resilience in the face of the climate crisis.

While fossil fuel companies have co-opted this moment to push for more gas development, the reality is these dirty fuels are a root cause of the global volatility, energy injustice and climate catastrophe we are all witnessing. It is therefore puzzling that the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) - our nation's largest public power provider - has proposed to invest in infrastructure that will increase our reliance on gas.

Just over a year ago President Biden declared that the U.S. electricity sector would achieve 100% carbon emission-free electricity by 2035. He also called for all federal agencies “to organize and deploy [their] full capacity . . . to combat the climate crisis.”¹ Earlier this year, the gravity of these demands became that much more pronounced with the dire Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. We cannot afford to prolong the warranty of fossil fuels, especially by investing in new fossil projects.

TVA’s announcement on the retirement of its Cumberland Fossil Plant is a welcome sign that the agency is transitioning away from coal. Unfortunately, the alternative TVA has proposed in its draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is incredibly concerning. To build a large Combined Cycle (CC) gas plant that would require the construction of a new 32-mile gas pipeline is a step in the wrong direction. According to its own analysis in the draft EIS, this new gas plant will contribute over 5.5 million short tons of direct CO₂ emissions per year.² Even more, over the project’s 30-year lifespan, this would amount to an alarming 165 million short tons of direct CO₂ emissions, without consideration of upstream methane emissions.

Furthermore, the timeline TVA has proposed for the retirement of the Cumberland units is out of line with climate science, which states that to have a decent chance at limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the United States must stop all coal extraction by 2030. The U.S. must also end gas production by 2034 to keep on track with the Paris Agreement.³ The agency’s plans to build another gas plant would prevent the U.S. from meeting these targets or put TVA customers on the hook to pay for an expensive power plant that can operate for only a few years.

Building new gas capacity as a “bridge” to integrating renewables is a misleading and long-debunked argument. We have domestic technology and, importantly, understand how to integrate renewable energy into the grid immediately. Other utility companies are doing just that. Expanding fossil fuel generation would further entrench TVA into decades of volatile, unreliable, and hazardous fossil fuels that would not only delay the agency’s long overdue

¹ See President Biden Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, Sections 201 and 205(b)(i) (“Biden Order”) (Jan. 27, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/>.

² See Cumberland Fossil Plant Retirement Draft Environmental Impact Statement, (April 25, 2022), available at https://tva-azr-eastus-cdn-ep-tvawcm-prd.azureedge.net/cdn-tvawcma/docs/default-source/environment/cuf-deis-report-only-20220421.pdf?sfvrsn=61161246_3.

³ See Rich Countries Must End Oil and Gas Production by 2034 for a Fair 1.5°C Transition, Institute for Sustainable Development, (March 22, 2022), <https://www.iisd.org/articles/analysis/rich-countries-must-end-oil-and-gas-production-2034>.

transition to 100% carbon-emission free electricity but also harm TVA's 10 million customers who already experience some of the highest electricity bills in the nation.⁴

To further burden these communities with stranded assets from additional gas infrastructure is especially troubling.⁵ Families are already experiencing skyrocketing gas prices as Russia's war in Ukraine continues to rattle global markets. Gas is a volatile fuel source, and the reality is fluctuating prices will remain a concern both now and in the future. However, renewable energy like solar has remained a cheap energy source that becomes more affordable through greater adoption, with the added benefits of cutting greenhouse gas emissions and reducing exposure to harmful pollutants.

Increased fracking and the transportation needed to supply methane gas for new gas plants pose dire health risks to communities already burdened by pollution, especially low-income communities and communities of color. Fracking impacts groundwater supplies, and the flaring often employed at methane gas plants adds harmful pollutants in the air that can adversely affect nearby communities. Additionally, pipelines nearly always leak, posing further public health risks.

TVA's proposal and overall deficient investment in solar, wind, storage, and energy efficiency, contravenes the agency's own mandate to steward the environment, improve the quality of life of Valley communities, pioneer clean energy technology, and reach their stated goal of net zero emissions by 2050. It is imperative TVA more comprehensively consider the climate, public health, and environmental justice concerns in their calculations surrounding the retirement of its coal fleet, and especially in the alternatives it examines for future energy supply.

TVA is a public power utility and should listen to what the public demands as has been demonstrated for years during public comment sessions and listening sessions. There is overwhelming support for a transition to clean, renewable energy that will lower utility bills and make communities resilient in the face of intensifying climate disasters and global price volatility.

With growing pressure to transition to clean, renewable energy and advance domestic energy independence, it is imperative that TVA reconsider its proposed methane gas replacement for the Cumberland Fossil Plant and prioritize investments in energy efficiency, solar, wind and storage. I urge you to immediately retire TVA's inefficient and unreliable coal plants and replace them

⁴ American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy, How energy efficiency can help low-income households in Tennessee (www.aceee.org/sites/default/files/pdf/fact-sheet/sestennessee-100917.pdf).

⁵ David Iaconangelo, "IPCC report: Oil, renewables and 'stranded assets'", E&E News, (April 5, 2022), <https://www.eenews.net/articles/ipcc-report-oil-renewables-and-stranded-assets/>.

with energy efficiency, distributed and well-sited large-scale solar, storage, and wind to achieve fossil fuel-free energy by 2030. TVA should also expand transmission connections to other high renewable resource areas to further accelerate the agency's transition off fossil fuels. Now is the moment to put Tennessee Valley communities and the climate first.

I appreciate your prompt attention to this urgent request.

As always, I remain,

Most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Steve Cohen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Steve Cohen
Member of Congress