For Immediate Release
Tuesday, April 29, 2003

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NEW REPORT DOCUMENTS WATER IMPACTS OF FOSSIL FUEL POWER PLANTS

Study presents water-saving opportunities and benefits

BOULDER, CO—A report released today by the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies and the Clean Air Task Force will assist planning and permitting agencies faced with difficult choices about proposed power plants. In a time of ongoing western drought, the study documents the impacts of different fuel types and technologies on both water quantity and quality.

The report, entitled "The Last Straw: Water Use by Power Plants in the Arid West," is intended to raise awareness among planners and the general public about the impacts these plants have on scarce water supplies. It also highlights alternatives to drought-intensified dilemmas regarding power plants—such as renewable energy, increased energy efficiency and low-water cooling technologies—at a time when dozens of new coal plants and natural gas plants have been proposed for the Interior West.

"While the air quality impacts of power generation from fossil fuels, particularly coal, are well known, little attention has been paid to how these plants affect water availability and quality," noted Ellen Baum, Ecosystem Scientist with the Clean Air Task Force. "It turns out fossil fuels-based power plants withdraw enough water each year to meet the annual needs of seven cities the size of Denver, Tucson, or Albuquerque. With the West facing severe drought conditions into the foreseeable future, we felt that a better understanding of water impacts should be the focus of systematic study."

"We can no longer afford to overlook how significantly power plant operations affect our rivers and streams in the western region," said Bart Miller, Water Program Director for the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies. "The drought has lowered stream flows across the west, compromising habitats for several key species as well as affecting human uses such as irrigation and recreation." Miller noted that Colorado's Arkansas River, spotlighted in the report, is a prime example of a river stretched beyond its capacity by competing demands for its water.

"Conflicts over water use have already begun to play a role in power plant permitting decisions across the West, including plants which have seen their permits denied or restricted in Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, and Arizona," said Miller. The report highlights some plants where competing water use claims have affected permitting.

"States with controversial new proposals for coal or gas plants include Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona," added John Nielsen, Energy Project Director of the Land and Water Fund. "We often provide technical and legal support to local citizens' groups promoting cleaner solutions, and we expect this report will be a key tool for them."

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In addition to reducing water availability, fossil-fuel plants also affect water quality. “ Water used for cooling at most plants in the region is treated with a variety of chemicals, which can be harmful to stream life,” Baum noted.

“The report graphically illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of the various cooling technologies, showing which procedures are safer for the environment and use the least amount of water,” explained John Thompson, Advocacy Coordinator of the Clean Air Task Force. “It shows that coal plants are far and away the greatest water users in the region, though gas plants can have significant impacts as well. It then presents practical opportunities for reducing water use impacts from fossil fuel generation.”

Common water effects of power plants include:

- Mortality of fish sucked into water intake pipes and screens
- Temperature variations that affect fish populations
- Pollution from chemicals used in the treatment and waste handling processes
- Build up of toxic compounds in wastewater and evaporation ponds that can harm wildlife

“It’s great to be able to provide planners and citizens with this comprehensive, clearly presented report,” said Nielsen. “There are many stakeholders in power plant permitting and water use decisions across the West. This report is particularly useful for its attention to how more efficient energy use and increased investments in very low water-use renewable technologies, such as wind and solar power can dramatically reduce water-use impacts from the power sector.”

A project of the Energy Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation, “The Last Straw” is available at www.lawfund.org, and www.catf.us.

About the Clean Air Task Force

The Clean Air Task Force is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to restoring clean air and healthy environments through scientific research, public education and legal advocacy.

About the Land and Water Fund

The Land and Water Fund of the Rockies is a regional environmental law and policy center serving the Interior West. It uses law, economics, and policy analysis to protect land, air, and water resources and assure that energy demands are met in an economically and environmentally sound manner.

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