

Omaha World-Herald

OPPD board votes to continue coal use at North Omaha plant — for now, [Nancy Gaarder](#) - Aug 18, 2022

on public health, the Omaha Public Power District board voted unanimously Thursday evening to continue burning coal — for the near term — at its North Omaha power plant.

Doing so is necessary, according to the utility's board and administration, to keep electricity flowing and avoid potential blackouts.



Coal is piled outside OPPD's North Omaha plant. Coal emissions are a major source of pollution, contributing to a variety of health problems. CHRIS MACHIAN, THE WORLD-HERALD

Coal plants are a major source of pollution, contributing to heart problems, asthma and other respiratory problems, neurological disorders and premature death. They also contribute to the rapid warming of the planet because their emissions include heat-trapping gases.

The power plant is along the Missouri River, south of the Interstate 680 bridge. It is near a densely populated residential area.

But if OPPD were to move forward with phasing out coal next year as it had planned, it would risk blackouts, not just locally but regionally, said Javier Fernandez, president and CEO. That's because it won't have replacement power at the ready.

Fernandez said such blackouts, if they were to occur, would likely happen on the coldest or hottest days of the year and could last days. Loss of power, he said, is life-threatening.

Phasing out coal use at OPPD's North Omaha plant next year would risk blackouts during the hottest and coldest times of the year, president and CEO Javier Fernandez said.

"It's incredibly important," he said.

The board had previously committed to terminating coal use in North Omaha in 2023. Some members of the public who spoke at the meeting characterized the board's decision as understandable but going back on that promise.

Several board members acknowledged the impact of their vote and described Thursday's decision as being between a rock and a hard place.

The decision to continue burning coal at the North Omaha plant is temporary, Fernandez and board members emphasized. The resolution that the board approved included a target end date of 2026 for coal use at the plant. By then, two new natural gas plants being built by OPPD are expected to be on-line.

The possible three-year delay is being caused primarily by a regional backlog in admitting new power plants to the grid. Each new power plant's connection to the grid has to be orchestrated or the act of connection could itself trigger a blackout, Fernandez said. The organization that oversees the connection, the Southwest Power Pool, has been overwhelmed by requests, he said.

Several members of the public asked that the vote be delayed a month so that the public would have more time to digest the complexity of the issue.

That's not possible, utility officials said, because months of planning are needed to take power plants off-line for maintenance and one of the North Omaha units needs to undergo such maintenance if it is to continue operating. Planning usually takes 18 months, and that unit is scheduled for a maintenance outage in the fall of 2023. (Maintenance at the plant will involve more than 1,200 work order tasks, 23,000 person hours and require about 25 additional outside contractors and 175 additional workers.)

One of the natural gas plants is being built near 168th Street and Fairview Road in Sarpy County, and the other is being built near North 120th Street and Military Road in Douglas County.

OPPD officials say they remain committed to reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

"Make no mistake, our commitment remains as solid as it was from Day One," Fernandez said.