

Imagine the Power

Can Santee Cooper Electric Really Be Green?

by Keith Waller



Fashionably Green

What it means to be “green” is difficult to define, especially these days. For some, green has become a fashionable label, one that we can slip on like a new pair of pants. Being green is certainly in vogue right now, and marketing groups have tapped into the trend as a tremendous way to boost sales. A 2007 Cone Consumer Survey revealed that 91% of adults hold a positive view of green companies, and 47% make “green purchases and decisions” on a regular basis. The study also found that 85% of consumers are willing to penalize companies that don’t act responsibly, by taking their dollars elsewhere.

Mean Green

Nefarious corporate giants such as Monsanto, the chemical company that brings us dangerous artificial sweeteners, bovine growth hormones, genetically modified goods, and is thought to be responsible for 56 superfund contamination sites, has a newly revised website with a fresh new logo that says, in clear green letters, “Monsanto – Imagine” with a green leafy frond beside it. Monsanto also touts their “green” awards for sustainable chemistry and a small “wildlife sanctuary preserve” at their office campus. In reality, any small space left to its own becomes a sanctuary for wildlife trying desperately to hide from human activity, so to announce an award for what some might more aptly call negligent lawn care is clearly suspicious in terms of integrity and intent.

Green on the Grand Strand

Here on the Grand Strand, we see Santee Cooper promoted frequently, and on two major points. First, the state-owned electric and water company claims to be leading the state in “going green,” yet in ads implies that we will soon be out of electricity. These claims are cleverly illustrated on highway billboards which show an electrical outlet distorted into a sad and anxious cartoon face. The second message, on the

webpage and in a mailer, is that Santee Cooper leads South Carolina in using conservation and sustainable energy approaches. This one is illustrated on a soft green background with child-like art and lots of leaves. It’s hard not to be both the leader and the tail-end of the parade when, for all practical purposes, you’re the only one marching. Santee Cooper is virtually the only power provider for the state, through its own retail services, various cooperatives and utilities. Nationally, however, South Carolina definitely trails far behind in the national parade of sustainability programs, solar energy promotion, conservation and other “green” programs, in place in other states since the 1980s.

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Santee Cooper is extremely efficient at doing one specific thing: providing cheap electricity, and lots of it, primarily by burning coal. According to national census figures, South Carolina has some of the lowest overall electricity rates in the country, but as a result, the state is also number four in the use of energy, using more electricity per person than nearly anyone on the planet. Is our electricity truly a bargain, or is it simply that we have yet to pay the bill in full? Coming due for payment are the costs for mercury contamination and CO2 burden, loss of fishing and wildlife, the cost of damage from acidified lakes, loss of fresh water during drought conditions, and the incalculable cost of damage to the health of our citizens. Santee Cooper is certainly not the only cause of these problems, but because of their large scale and our subsequent heavy use of electricity, they are a major contributor.

For decades, DHEC has been quietly warning the public to avoid contact with local waters due to a variety of pollut-

ants. Until now, they have never checked for mercury in people, but have been testing more than 1,800 fish per year and have been issuing warnings about eating the fish caught in rivers and lakes in the area, including certain species caught offshore. Miniscule amounts of mercury can be dangerous, and just one drop of mercury introduced into a 20 acre lake can contaminate fish and wildlife. Mercury then accumulates in human tissue when the contaminated fish are eaten, and at high enough levels, this can cause nerve damage, heart disorders and other health problems. Diligent journalists at the *Post and Courier* newspaper have coordinated independent laboratory testing, which revealed alarmingly high mercury levels in area residents. This inspired an angry crowd of citizens, including some physicians, to appear at the Florence DHEC offices on December 6th demanding that something be done. "Given that attention, I thought it was time to take a comprehensive look at the prevalence of mercury in the environment and its impact on our citizens," said Earl Hunter, DHEC Commissioner, as reported by the League of Conservation Voters.

A public relations firm was hired by Santee Cooper, at a cost of approximately \$650,000, to change the feelings of residents about coal and electricity, and to associate Santee Cooper with solar energy and "greenness." Their ultimate goal is to build public support for the construction of another 650 megawatt coal-fired power plant near Florence, within the polluted corridor known as the "Mercury Triangle."

Solar or Coal

While solar power panels adorn and decorate much of their literature, website and media propaganda, Santee Cooper's actual policy is not supportive of citizens who contribute to conservation or who produce their own power during the hot sunny days of peak power demand. "Here in South Carolina, there's still a good bit of cloud cover," said Laura Varn, VP of Communications for Santee



Cooper, in a *Charleston Business Journal* article regarding solar power (May, 2007). This is repeated in a public relations mailing of December 2007 and on their website, where they reiterate that solar power does not work well in South Carolina. Is South Carolina too cloudy for solar power? "Not true," according to Dan Evans of Carolina Solar. "Here on the coast, we get as much sun as Central Florida." Federal solar data also seems to refute Santee Cooper's claims, as does the fact that Germany, which is under cloud cover much more often than is SC, gets a substantial amount of its electricity from solar power

Santee Cooper has proudly touted their programs of providing 0% interest loans for solar-electric systems (available to only 10 homeowners, and which expires April 10th),

free compact florescent bulbs, and professional home energy analyses, but with each offer, there is a significant cost. Going to a solar power system requires a switch to their "Net Billing" rate schedule, doubling the monthly customer charge. To add to it, not only is there comparatively little return on the solar electricity homeowners generate for Santee Cooper, but homeowners are exposed to an additional "demand charge" that no one at Santee Cooper is able to estimate or quantify. Potentially, the program could leave homeowners with a higher electric bill, not a lower one, while providing Santee Cooper low cost electricity that would otherwise cost them exorbitant amounts from other sources during power shortages. Install solar space heating, and you climb to a higher energy rate schedule because you use less electricity in the winter (summer use cannot be more than 140% of winter use). Install an energy saving tankless electric water heater, and you go to the "demand rate," which may also be much higher. Install gas heat or hot water to lessen the severe power demand of a hot summer day, and you no longer have an "all-electric home," which excludes you from the "Good Cents" program. Solar hot water systems are acceptable, but not if they reduce your demand for winter heat and throw your 140% summer-winter ratio out of kilter. So what has the result been? No one has taken Santee Cooper up on their solar power program to date, and conservation in the Grand Strand is stuck.

Policy from the Top

Lonnie Carter, president of Santee Cooper, questions the very existence of global warming as a man-made phenomenon that we have the ability to control. In an interview with the *Post and Courier*, Carter says "I think there's been a lot said about this, and there's a lot unknown and an awful lot of rhetoric out there that's not supported by hard evidence." Accepting the reality of congressionally mandated limits on CO2 emissions, he offers that by 2016, a nuclear power plant will be the answer to South Carolina's thirst for cheap, plentiful electricity. With regard to mercury, Carter defends Santee Cooper: "A lot is said about where mercury comes from in our waters. The information I get from the EPA is that it's not coming from U.S. power plants. According to the information they put out is that power plants contribute only 1% of the mercury."

The Electric Future

According to the Department of Energy, the price of coal has doubled over the past year, and 20% of that increase was in just the last month. Adding this to the future cost of capped carbon emissions and the potential costs to clean up more mercury, and electricity in South Carolina is about to get a great deal more expensive. The only solution for cash-strapped residents will be to take immediate steps toward using a great deal less of it. A real electricity capacity challenge for the Grand Strand is coming, as the area continues to attract more business and newcomers because of the wonderful sunny weather, ocean air and mild winters. Growth increases demand, and so does the next unaccounted for issue on the horizon: plug-in cars.

Electric Cars Didn't Die

Several new electric cars have been on display for the past several months at North Beach Shopping Center in North

Myrtle Beach from the Bleeker Automotive, a dealership near Fayetteville, NC. More than 30 more models from several manufacturers will appear over the next two years, including a plug-in version of the Prius, the Chevy Volt, and a pickup truck coming later this year. The pickup will go 250 miles between charges using a nano-technology super battery developed by Altair Technology. These batteries are so powerful and efficient that AES, a Virginia electric power company, is using two railroad car sized versions of this super battery to provide megawatt-scale electricity storage for Northern Virginia electric power customers. These new electric trucks and cars using the super battery will need to be fueled by Santee Cooper, instead of Exxon, Shell, or Kangaroo, and no one at Santee Cooper has publicly acknowledged the need. Still, as surely as there will be electric golf carts racing along the 9th fairway Saturday afternoon, there will be electric cars racing down Highway 501 in 2010.

Imagine

Now, imagine a slightly different future. The roof of every home covered in inexpensive nano-technology solar panels pumping watts into every home, super batteries mounted beside every electric meter to provide nighttime power, and the family car plugged into a handy garage outlet. Imagine the energy industry providing jobs in South Carolina, adding "green" income to our economy. Imagine that every month, a check arrives for a portion of the power Santee Cooper sells to the grid on our behalf, and never receiving a home electric bill again. Imagine the simplicity of inexpensive, powerful, and quiet electric automobiles that require little maintenance. Envision Santee Cooper wind farms on the horizon of Long Bay, sending power toward the beach to meet increasing commercial demands, blades turning lazily in the sun. Imagine what it means for all of us, as those twinkling lights in Long Bay and along the Strand remind us that they are there, working silently, cleanly and tirelessly for us.

It's your electric company. Tell them what you think. Santee Cooper? Are you listening?



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