Great Plains plans two new plants

Construction on site near Weston could begin in 2004

By STEVE EVERLY The Kansas City Star

Great Plains Energy Inc. could start construction next year on a coal-fired power plant near Weston and hopes to build a second plant later in Atchison County, Kan.

For the last year, Great Plains has said the Weston plan was on the back burner. But Tuesday, at a meeting held by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the company’s plans came out for the two plants, which would generate electricity for the wholesale market.

The Tuesday meeting was closed to the press, but details came out Wednesday, and Great Plains confirmed that a second plant, to be built about eight miles southeast of Atchison, was being proposed.

Tom Robinson, a spokesman for Great Plains, said construction on the plant near Weston could start in 2004, depending on several factors, such as the market for wholesale power.

“We could begin if conditions are right,” Robinson said, adding that the company wanted to have all the necessary regulatory approvals for the plant in hand by next year.

The two plants would be huge. Robinson said the plans were for each of them to provide 750 megawatts of electricity. The combined output of the coal-fired plants would be enough to supply 1 million households.

Robinson could not say when construction on the Atchison plant could start. Coal-fired generating plants take four to five years to complete.

A document compiled for Great Plains, distributed at the meeting, stated that the preferred site for the Weston plant would be next to Weston Bend State Park, which the document called “a wonderful upland forested area with scenic overlooks of the Missouri River.”

Great Plains Energy is the parent of Kansas City Power & Light Co., its regulated utility. An unregulated Great Plains subsidiary, Great Plains Power, would operate the two proposed plants, selling the power on the unregulated wholesale market.

The Weston plant first became known to the public in a newspaper story in July 2001. Though state utility regulators do not have authority over the construction of unregulated power plants, the Missouri Public Service Commission was upset that it had not been told of the proposal. The company apologized.

“We should never have allowed this to happen,” said James Fisher, an attorney for the company at that time. Regulators were considering a corporate reorganization to create Great Plains Energy as a holding company.

About a year ago, company officials began saying that the Weston plant was on the back burner — a stance that was reiterated as recently as last week. Robinson said Great Plains still wanted conditions to be right
before the plant was built. Though the Atchison plant was not announced, he said the company had said it was looking at multiple sites.

But some critics of the plant are suspicious that Great Plains is trying to keep a low profile on the proposed plants until it receives regulatory approvals.

"It seems to us they're trying to see that the public doesn't know about this," said Melissa Blakley, an organizer for the Sierra Club.

The Sierra Club is a critic of coal-fired plants because of the pollution they produce. Blakley said club members were particularly concerned that two huge plants were being proposed at sites close together, making the situation even worse.

State environmental officials would have to give the plants air permits so that they could operate. The Army Corps of Engineers is reviewing the plans to examine possible effects on the Missouri River and nearby wetlands.

The Army Corps of Engineers held its meeting Tuesday at KCP&L's Iatan plant, which is near the proposed plant sites. The meeting, however, was open only to those who had filed formal comments. Other members of the public and the news media were turned away at the plant's gates.

Blakley said she was told by a Corps of Engineers official that the agency could rely on the formal comments and did not need to hold a public hearing. She said the Sierra Club was considering holdings its own hearings about the proposed plants. A Corps of Engineers official could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Great Plains Energy stock closed Wednesday at $31.99 a share, down 9 cents.

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