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Smoke stacks 'history'

The Bakersfield Californian | Tuesday, Jun 3 2008 9:07 PM

Last Updated: Tuesday, Jun 3 2008 9:08 PM

Kern County has been on the leading edge of power generation for decades, starting with the petroleum industry and the various extraction technologies it has developed or refined over the years.

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Now Kern County will be the site of another power-generation innovation -- this one unique for its greenhouse gas-fighting potential rather than its energy production.

Rancho Cordova-based Clean Energy Systems plans to build a 50-megawatt power plant on Kimberlina Road, about 20 miles north of Bakersfield, by 2011. The plant will capture carbon dioxide -- a primary culprit in global warming -- and store it underground, beneath layers of porous sandstone capped by impermeable shale rock.

The process is unusual but not new. Norway has been injecting carbon dioxide into formations beneath the Norwegian Sea for decades, and BP Global has been injecting CO2 into the ground in Algeria in natural gas operations.

But underground CO2 disposal is new in the United States, where public-private partnerships such as the West Coast Regional Carbon Sequestration Partnership are exploring an array of projects.

It turns out Kern County is a perfect candidate, thanks to its geology. Scientists say once CO2 is trapped in sandstone formations, it's there for good. The project would require drilling a 7,000-foot hole, something else Kern County knows something about. There's a 22,000-foot oil well at Elk Hills.

The project is expected to keep about a million tons of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere over several years, in addition to other undesirable emissions.

"I hope 20 years from now people look back and say, 'Why did we ever have (smoke) stacks on power plants?'" said Keith Pronske, Clean Energy Systems' chief executive officer.

Indeed, we hope to ask that very question -- maybe even sooner than 20 years.

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