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Area emissions control urged

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By John Laidler, Globe Correspondent | September 4, 2005

He once locked horns with Governor Mitt Romney over the state's refusal to give the local power plant more time to meet emission standards. But now Salem's mayor, Stanley J. Usovicz Jr., wants the Northeast to set an example for curbing power plant pollution.

Usovicz and Gloucester Mayor John Bell are among 49 mayors and other local officials from the Northeast who signed a recent letter to the states' governors, urging them to forge a regional agreement to cut carbon dioxide emissions from power plants.

Carbon dioxide emissions contribute to global warming, and a major source of those emissions are power plants that consume fossil fuels.

Usovicz said his decision to sign the letter is consistent with the approach he has taken in trying to keep open the Salem Harbor power station, which burns oil and coal, while also pushing for it to clean up its emissions.

"We've worked very closely with the owners of the plant, with state officials, and with other environmental interests to reduce emissions at this particular power plant," he said. "Other mayors and elected officials should do likewise."

In early 2003 Romney declared that the state would not extend a deadline for the Salem Harbor power station to comply with Massachusetts emission rules, the toughest in the nation.

Usovicz and other Salem officials denounced the move, saying it would lead to the closure of their city's largest taxpayer and a major employer.

But later that year, city and state officials, environmental advocates, and the plant's owner at the time, PG&E Corp. of San Francisco, agreed on a plan for the company to come into compliance with the pollution rules. And in May, a revised agreement was struck among the state, the city, environmental advocates, and Dominion Resources Inc. of Richmond, Va., which acquired the 745-megawatt plant earlier in the year.

Usovicz said the agreements showed "We didn't want to lose the tax base, the jobs, and clearly the electricity, but that we also wanted them to operate in an environmentally sound way. And that's what we were able to achieve.

"I think when you are rational about things, and in particular rational about the environment, things tend to work out," Usovicz said.

Through the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, nine Northeast states, including Massachusetts, are attempting to craft a regional plan to reduce carbon dioxide emissions through a model "cap and trade" system. Each state would set its own carbon dioxide emission limits, and power plants in the region could "trade" emissions by buying and selling emission permits.

Late this month, officials from the nine states are set to meet to try to finalize a proposed agreement.

In their letter, local officials voiced full support for a cap-and-trade system, and urged that the states move forward to develop that model under the regional initiative.

"As mayors, we understand that addressing carbon pollution brings many benefits to our communities -- not the least of which is a reduction in levels of the criteria air pollutants detrimental to human health," the local

officials wrote.

Coordinating the letter-writing effort was Clean Air-Cool Planet, a nonprofit based in Portsmouth, N.H., that works with municipalities to lower greenhouse emissions.

"We are very excited to see all these cities and towns involved," said Amelia Ravin, the group's community program coordinator. "Many of them have not necessarily been in the forefront on this issue. But it's clear that local governments care about regional pollution issues."

Bell said it makes sense for communities, particularly those on the coast, to combat global warming.

"Throughout the world, we are slowly losing parts of our shoreline due to the effects of global warming," he said. "I think everyone has to join the chorus. Mayors are leaders, and it's our job to step up on issues that affect our communities. Surely, in both the short term and the long term, this can continue to have a harmful effect on our environment in Cape Ann."

Both Gloucester and Salem already have taken local steps to address global warming. Both have joined the Cities for Climate Protection Campaign, an international effort by local governments to reduce their greenhouse emissions. Also in Gloucester, Bell recently established a Renewable Energy Committee.

Tim Greiner of Gloucester, a member of that committee as well as the Cape Ann Climate Change Network, a citizens' group, said he is pleased to see Bell and other mayors speaking up about global warming. ■

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