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COAL CONTROL

AUDUBON AND THE SIERRA CLUB CELEBRATE A LANDMARK SETTLEMENT.

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Just north of Interstate 30 in southwestern Arkansas, bald-cypress trees submerged in swamps and bottomland hardwoods provide habitat for the endangered interior least tern and the iconic bald eagle. One of Audubon's Important Bird Areas, the 18,001-acre Little River Bottoms nesting ground is home to more than 11,000 waterbirds, and hosts thousands of migratory waterfowl each winter.

But in 2006 American Electric Power and its subsidiary, Southwestern Electric Power Co. (SWEPCO), announced plans to construct what is now a \$1.7 billion, 600-megawatt coal-fired power plant just east of the reserve that threatened this habitat (see "Smoke on the Water," January-February 2008). A vicious legal battle erupted over the project's future and conservation of the neighboring ecosystem.

In December, after four years of lawsuits with National Audubon, Audubon Arkansas, and the Sierra Club over the construction of the John W. Turk Jr. plant, the electric companies surrendered. They agreed to, in time, close a dirtier, 558-megawatt Welsh (Unit 2) plant in Pittsburg, Texas, in place of forfeiting the SWEPCO plant's construction.

Audubon and the Sierra Club originally set out to stop the Turk plant, but by the time the agreement was reached, the plant was already 80 percent built, says Ellen Fennell, vice president and director of Audubon Arkansas. “The main thing we wanted to focus on was lowering emissions from coal-fired power plants, and we managed to do that with the settlement,” she says.

SWEPCO spokesperson Peter Main says the power company weighed the costs of a protracted legal fight. “We believe that settling the case at that point provided a way forward,” Main says. “In the long run it’s better for our customers from a cost standpoint.”

Under the terms of the agreement, the Welsh 2 plant will close by 2016; in the meantime, as soon as Turk begins operations later this year, Welsh will reduce its output by 40 percent. The company must also purchase 400 megawatts of wind energy and will provide \$8 million to The Nature Conservancy for conservation and habitat restoration in Arkansas, plus an additional \$2 million to the Arkansas Community Foundation to support clean energy and energy-efficiency efforts.

The settlement also addressed Audubon and the Sierra Club concerns about transmission lines disturbing the area. The power company agreed not to site future lines in the Nacatoches Ravines Natural Area, the Little River, and the Bois d’Arc Wildlife Management Area, among other natural sites.

“We certainly believe that we’re good stewards of the environment,” Main says. “We can operate in an environmentally responsible way, and we believe we’ve demonstrated that time and time again with our other operations.”

Still, Fennell remains concerned about the power plant. Along with creating choking smog, acid rain, and toxic coal ash, coal-fired power plants also account for 33 percent of all energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. The typical coal-fired power plant produces more than 3.7 million tons of carbon dioxide per year—the equivalent of cutting down 161 million trees. Also, mercury emissions from the plants affect birds during the nesting season.

“There are mercury problems in the area already,” says Fennell. “The plant will increase the mercury levels where so many birds breed.”