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Madness Beyond March: The UNC Coal Plant

Top university is putting students at risk with archaic energy production

I went to the Dean Dome for my first University of North Carolina Tar Heels basketball game in February. Coby White scored 33 points that afternoon, and I shouted the notorious “Luuuuke” cheer when Luke Maye hit the three to go into overtime with Miami.

I don’t claim to be a college basketball expert. In fact Brandon Huffman was my favorite player this year because I liked his pregame dance moves.

Still, it was heartbreaking to see them lose to Auburn during March Madness. And I couldn’t help thinking that the Tar Heels entered this tournament with one disadvantage that hasn’t been covered in the media: The players live, practice and play breathing dirty air polluted by the university’s coal plant.

Burning coal is a major health hazard to the Chapel Hill community and an outdated means of energy production. It releases harmful toxins such as nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide,

mercury, lead and carbon into the air. Degraded air quality from burning coal leads to asthma, heart disease and even premature death.

Despite the availability of clean-energy technologies, the university made the irresponsible decision to revoke its promise to be coal free by 2020 and has no plans to shut down the plant. It's currently working on renewing its permit.

The permit for the UNC coal plant allows it to emit four to six times the limits of nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide pollution found to be safe under the Clean Air Act. Air-modeling research done by the Center for Biological Diversity, where I work, indicates that almost the entire campus and multiple residential neighborhoods in Chapel Hill are close enough to the plant to be at risk from these toxins.

This kind of air pollution is known to have a negative impact on athletic performance in both practices and games. Breathing at a normal rate, our bodies have a better chance of absorbing toxins like sulfur dioxide before they move into the lungs. But when breathing through the mouth during intense aerobic exercise like running, toxins will move further into the airways and potentially reach the lungs.

The impact of the UNC coal plant reaches beyond the campus and local community. The university gets its coal 270 miles away in Virginia, where mining destroys pristine mountains and rivers, and has implications for the people of Appalachia as well as endangered wildlife. Burning coal is also a major contributor to climate change.

It doesn't have to be this way. UNC Chapel Hill is a renowned research, innovation and medical university. It produced more

than 750 research projects addressing the health, education or well-being of North Carolina citizens in 2016 alone—yet it operates the only remaining coal plant at a college or university in the state of North Carolina. It should be bringing its students and the surrounding community into a healthier future, not using an outdated form of energy that threatens the health of people and the planet.

That's why the Center is launching the No Coal UNC campaign to shut down the coal plant and improve the health of the community. You can get involved at www.nocoalunc.org.