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‘Santa Says Coal is Naughty’: Protesters Rally Against Coal Plant, UNC

Posted by [Dakota Moyer](#) | Dec 6, 2019 | 97.9FM The Hill

Earlier this week, two conservation groups filed a lawsuit against UNC, accusing the university of having violated the Clean Air Act by not following pollution control requirements at a plant used by the school.

But for Gary Richards, this was just the latest step in the battle against the coal plant and the university.

"I've been out here since May 17," Richards said, "because I live a block away from the coal plant and two of my granddaughters go to school a couple of blocks in the other direction at Frank Porter Graham so it's an immediate thing for me."

Dressed as Santa Claus and holding a sign that read 'Santa says coal is naughty,' Richards joined other members of the community in the weekly protest outside the coal plant on Cameron Avenue.

In the lawsuit, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club contend UNC repeatedly violates federal law by [not following pollution control requirements](#) at a plant used to power the school. The Center for Biological Diversity says the plant uses two coal-burning boilers that are outdated and significantly contribute to air pollution.

When asked about the news of the lawsuit against UNC, protesters said it was time for the university to find a new form of energy.

"It's time for the Board of Trustees and the faculty and all students," said Jay Dunbar, "to make plain that coal is not a viable source of energy and there's plenty of other options."

A common theme for all those gathered outside: they live in the area or have family close by the coal plant.

In 2010, former UNC chancellor Holden Thorp said the university aimed to be operating coal-free by 2020, but many reports show the goal was abandoned shortly after because of financial restrictions. Former chancellor Carol Folt — who left the university in early 2019 — pledged during her tenure that UNC would aim to be carbon neutral by 2050.

Diane Nelson remembered UNC's promise of change, but said legal action might be required for the action to get accomplished.

"The university had promised to shut [the coal plant] down," she said. "I think they understand as well as anyone — there's a lot of scientists that work there — about the effects of this kind of thing. If they aren't willing to shut it down under the promises that they made, then it might take the courts in order to do it."

Nelson, who lives in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro area, said she's concerned about the potential impact on children.

"Where the coal plant is specifically terrifying is not only because it's part of this much larger system that's destroying the climate, but also because I live in the area where all those particulates are coming into my body. It's coming into the bodies of the kids who grow up next to me in these expensive neighborhoods where you pay your taxes for the good schools."

It's unclear when the lawsuit against the university will be heard in the U.S. District Court in Greensboro.