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Environmental Groups Oppose New Energy Bill's Focus on Unproven & Expensive Coal Technologies

Harrisburg, PA—Four of Pennsylvania's largest environmental groups announced their opposition today to proposed legislation which would require the state to generate 3 percent of its electricity from power plants equipped with carbon capture and sequestration technology—an expensive technology that does not yet exist in commercial form. PennEnvironment, Sierra Club Pennsylvania Chapter, Clean Air Council and Clean Water Action made their announcement in response to a press event held by the bill's sponsors—state Representatives Greg Vitali and Chris Ross, and state Senator Ted Erickson—to announce the new legislation (House Bill 80 and Senate Bill 92).

“This legislation represents a dangerous case of putting a very expensive cart before the horse for Pennsylvania,” said Nathan Willcox, Energy & Clean Air Advocate with PennEnvironment. “Requiring a portion of the state's electricity to come from carbon capture and sequestration facilities before such technology even exists in commercial form is a waste of state resources, and distracts us from the proven clean energy solutions that deserve the state's support.”

“This bill requires the Commonwealth to assume all liability for geologic carbon storage, including environmental and private property damage, as well as fatalities, in the event of a facility failure,” said Jeff Schmidt, Director of the Sierra Club Pennsylvania Chapter. “Given the scientific uncertainties of geological sequestration, and the failure to provide a transparent site characterization process, these liability provisions represent an unacceptable threat to Pennsylvania,” he continued.

“The legislation proposes that Pennsylvania assume liability for any problems associated with this unproven technology. That is a raw deal for Pennsylvania taxpayers,” said Joseph Otis Minott, Executive Director of the Clean Air Council. “If taxpayers are going to subsidize energy production, let's make it for wind and solar energy.”

“If coal companies aren't even sure this technology is viable, why are we promoting it? We know how to stop global warming—we should focus on proven strategies that work,” stated Myron Arnowitt, Pennsylvania State Director for Clean Water Action.

The groups did praise the proposed legislation's call for an increase in the clean Tier 1 of Pennsylvania's alternative energy standard, as well as an increase in the 'carve-out' specifically for solar power. The legislation would require that 20 percent of the state's electricity come from cleaner sources including wind and solar power by 2026. The current Tier 1 standard for these resources stands at 8 percent.

But the groups pointed to two fatal flaws around the legislation's focus on carbon capture and sequestration (CCS): the tremendous uncertainties around the feasibility and cost of CCS, and the diversion of resources from proven clean energy solutions like energy efficiency, and wind and solar power.

The laudable goal of CCS systems is to capture global warming pollution produced by power plants before it escapes into the atmosphere, and then permanently store this pollution underground. Coal-fired power plants are the top source of global warming pollution in Pennsylvania, and across the country.

Unfortunately, most experts agree that CCS is far from market-ready, and the costs associated with making it market-ready are uncertain. There are no coal plants that capture and store their carbon dioxide pollution in operation in the United States, and even coal utility executives have expressed pessimism about the technology's prospects. Jim Rogers, Duke Energy's CEO, said in June of last year, “CCS as a magical technology that solves the carbon problem for coal plants is oversold...I think there is a lot to

learn, and it is going to take us a lot longer for us to figure it out than a lot of us think.” With regard to cost, studies out of MIT and the Western Governors Association found that CCS could increase the costs of electricity from coal by over 60 percent.

“No one is saying that utilities and the government should abandon research on CCS technologies,” said Willcox. “But to *require* that a portion of the state’s electricity come from CCS before it is commercially viable and its many uncertainties have been addressed seems dangerously misguided.”

The groups also pointed out that the legislation’s draft language has the state assuming all liability for the sequestration sites for pollution deposited in the early years. Given the uncertainties around this technology—and around the liability issues for sequestration sites specifically—no one is sure how expensive assuming such liability would be for the state, and for Pennsylvania taxpayers. The groups instead suggested that a better plan would be for the utilities and coal companies—those responsible for creating the pollution—to assume liability, with a measure in place to protect ratepayers from exorbitant resulting rate increases.

Also, in the event that the state is unable to develop a viable sequestration network, the draft legislation would still give AEPS credit to power plants that have installed the carbon capture technology. In other words, plants could be receiving credit for capturing and sequestering their pollution—without actually sequestering their pollution.

Finally, the groups pointed out that several studies have documented how the world can cut pollution to the levels scientists say are necessary to avoid the worst consequences of global warming, without the use of CCS technology. Instead, aggressive deployment of clean energy solutions like energy efficiency, wind energy, geothermal power and solar power can lead to the reductions in global warming pollution called for by scientists.

The groups planned to send a letter outlining their concerns to all members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate today, and said they would work in the coming weeks and months to see that the sequestration language is either removed or significantly scaled back.

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PennEnvironment is a citizen-based environmental advocacy organization with roughly 15,000 citizen members across Pennsylvania. More information can be found at www.PennEnvironment.org

Sierra Club is a grassroots environmental organization, formed in 1892, with approximately 27,000 members in Pennsylvania. More information can be found at www.Pennsylvania.SierraClub.org

Clean Air Council is a membership-based environmental organization with over 8,000 members in Pennsylvania. More information on the Council can be found at www.CleanAir.org

Clean Water Action is an environmental organization with over 100,000 members in Pennsylvania. Clean Water Action works to empower residents to take action to protect our waters, build healthy communities, and make democracy work for all of us. More information can be found at www.CleanWaterAction.org/pa