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Environmental Justice Realized in San Francisco Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Closes Last Fossil-Fuel Power Plant Today

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Environmental Justice Realized in San Francisco
Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Closes Last Fossil-Fuel Power Plant Today
Community Groups', City of San Francisco's and
Golden Gate University School of Law's Environmental Law & Justice Clinic's
Decade-Long Efforts Come to Fruition

SAN FRANCISCO, CA: Today, in Potrero Hill, the last fossil fuel power plant in the City of San Francisco will close after a decade of legal efforts by community groups, the City of San Francisco and Golden Gate University School of Law's Environmental Law & Justice Clinic (ELJC). On December 21, 2010, local and state figures gathered to announce the closure. Late last week, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) made official the decision for today's closure. For San Francisco residents in Bayview Hunters Point, Dogpatch and in the Potrero neighborhood where the plant is located, this means a future free of noxious air pollution.

ELJC Director Professor Helen Kang describes the significance of the final closure this way,

“This is an environmental victory, but an equally important social justice coup, as these polluting plants were inevitably located in the low-income and working class neighborhoods of San Francisco, affecting a high percentage of non-white residents.”

Golden Gate Law's ELJC and community groups have worked for decades on a regional level to reduce dependence on fossil-fuel based energy generation. Along the way, the Clinic filed a

lawsuit against the Potrero power plant owner Mirant (now GenOn) to enforce the Clean Air Act, and law students testified before hearings held before the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

ELJC was also involved in efforts that shut down the plant in Bayview Hunters Point in 2006. Eliminating fossil fuel plants in San Francisco required community groups (with ELJC performing legal work) to exhaust every possible avenue. Community groups organized and put on demonstrations, and legal advocates, including the Clinic and the City Attorney's Office, monitored the power plants' compliance with environmental laws and advocated for eliminating the use of bay waters as cooling sources for the plant—a practice that environmentalists say endangered aquatic life in the Bay.

Golden Gate Law Professor Alan Ramo, who led ELJC efforts in the early years, reflects on the decade-long, collaborative effort that made this monumental day possible.

“I am grateful to ELJC’s clients such as the Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates and Communities for a Better Environment for giving our Clinic the opportunity to support their tireless and heroic efforts. Likewise, we are deeply thankful for the consistent support of The City Attorney's office, and in particular Theresa Mueller, Supervisor Sophie Maxwell and (former) Supervisor Aaron Peskin.”

While today’s closure represents a tremendous effort and victory for environmental justice, it is one component of multi-faceted, global effort aimed at increasing renewable energy sources. At the United Nations Climate Change Conference in December 2010, scientists and environmental leaders agreed upon the need to address climate change globally. More stringent actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in particular by industrialized nations (and in states like California), cannot be postponed much longer. Still, today’s plant closure is a powerful symbol of community solidarity. Resident and community leader Karen Pierce of Bayview Hunters Point Community Advocates describes the meaning of today’s closure this way:

“This final closure demonstrates that communities working together along with their government can successfully eliminate fossil fuel and other pollutants that affect their neighborhoods and families.”

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