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The Hudson at Risk

This time of year most lawns suddenly sprout election placards. But in Columbia County, N.Y., the election placards stand alongside signs that say either "Stop the Plant" or "Support the Plant." The plant is a proposed coal-burning cement manufacturing facility that would be built, if approved, along the Hudson River near the city of Hudson and the town of Greenport. In effect, St. Lawrence Cement, which is owned by the Swiss company Holcim, would create an industrial city on the waterfront, including 40 acres of buildings, a 1,200-acre open-pit limestone mine, a new dock, a two-mile-long conveyor belt and a smokestack that would stand 400 feet high. The plant is inappropriate, and Gov. George Pataki and his environmental conservation commissioner, Erin Crotty, must stop it.

Opposition to this plant has been growing steadily among environmentalists and local residents. Their biggest worry is the huge plume that would pour out of the smokestack, a plume containing 20 million pounds of pollution a year, including high concentrations of fine particulate matter and other health hazards. Beyond that, a cement kiln happens to work very well as a hazardous waste incinerator, and St. Lawrence Cement has insisted on obtaining a permit to use the plant as an incinerator. The company says it does not plan to burn waste. But if the chance exists, it may well be seized.

Last December, an administrative law judge in the state's Department of Environmental Conservation ruled that further hearings were needed before the department could decide whether St. Lawrence Cement's application could move ahead. The hearings would examine basic issues like the problem of emissions and the potential effect of the plant on fish

life, on traffic, on local historical and cultural resources and on the esthetic quality of the region. St. Lawrence Cement appealed to Commissioner Crotty, asking her, essentially, to skip the hearings and jump to the next stage in permitting the plant.

At the very least, Ms. Crotty should insist that full hearings proceed, as dictated by state law. This plant is wildly out of scale for its setting, and important questions about the potential effect of its emissions and its daily operations have not been answered. Supporters argue that the plant will create jobs, but even St. Lawrence Cement has estimated that when its old Catskill plant closes, the net increase in jobs will be just one. The plant would also have a negative effect on an area that has been revitalized by its scenic, cultural and historic resources. The economic future of the Hudson River depends on them, not on cement.

Ms. Crotty will presumably have to take into account the views of her boss, Mr. Pataki, but there is no obvious reason why the governor would want this plant. Mr. Pataki has painstakingly built a strong environmental record, particularly when it comes to the Hudson, and this plant is fundamentally inconsistent with his hopes for the river. Mr. Pataki and his fellow Northeastern governors have made a point of trying to get coal-burning power plants in the Midwest to cut their emissions. To build a coal-burning cement plant right on the Hudson makes no sense at all.

The governor of Maine, Angus King, has expressed his concerns, as has the Connecticut attorney general, Richard Blumenthal. Mr. Pataki should listen to them and, most of all, to the concerned citizens of the Hudson Valley.

<http://www.stoptheplant.com>