

Conservationists protest Malaysia coal plant plan

July 5 2010, By JULIA ZAPPEI , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Conservationists criticized a plan Monday to build a coal-fired power plant in an environmentally fragile state on Borneo island, but energy officials said the project will provide a much-needed electricity supply boost.

Energy projects have often generated protests in Malaysia's two states in Borneo, with activists alleging authorities and companies ignore the rights of indigenous tribal communities and cause environmental harm by cutting down swaths of jungle.

Green Surf, a coalition of nongovernment conservation groups, including the World Wildlife Fund, said a proposed [coal plant](#) near a [wildlife reserve](#) in Sabah state would displace villagers and threaten endangered orangutans and other animals like rhinoceroses and elephants.

"They cannot say that the impact is very small and isolated," Green Surf official Cynthia Ong said. "We really feel we have to stand firm on this no-coal message."

Sabah Electricity, the state's main power supplier, has said the 300-megawatt plant is needed to meet [electricity demand](#), which is expected to increase up to 8 percent annually.

The plant has not yet been formally approved by the Malaysian government's Department of Environment, said Ahmad Faraid Yahya, the director of the project's main developer, Lahad Datu Energy Sdn.

Bhd.

If it is approved, construction could begin by the middle of next year at an estimated cost of 1.7 billion ringgit (\$529.5 million), he said. The plant could then start operating by March 2013.

Ahmad Faraid pledged that developers would use equipment to reduce harmful emissions and monitor air and water quality regularly. He added the plant would be located in a palm oil plantation so that no wildlife or villagers would be affected.

In Malaysia's neighboring Sarawak state in Borneo, conservationists have criticized the construction of various dams that have displaced thousands of indigenous people and triggered land rights disputes.

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