

# Power plant's fall comes five years after rise



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## Highwood Generating Station will be gone by November



(Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/ION SANDERS)

Dismantling of a \$125 million, 46-megawatt natural gas-fired power plant is underway east of Great Falls, its fall coming just five years after its rise began with a construction groundbreaking in October 2010.

Visitors weren't allowed into the Highwood Generating Station site Thursday.

But from the entrance, workers in raised vehicle buckets could be seen working on poles and electrical lines. A crane was positioned next to the tallest and most valuable feature of the plant, a turbine that powered the facility.

"Work started early September," said Dean Swick, a court-appointed trustee for the Highwood Generating Station Holding Trust, who confirmed that the dismantling of the facility has begun. "And we expect all the work to be completed early November."

That deadline is subject to the weather and unforeseen delays, Swick said.

Southern Montana Electric Generation and Transmission Cooperative, made up of rural cooperatives and the city of Great Falls, built the plant, but the co-op declared bankruptcy in 2011.

The HGS Holding Trust was formed by the bankruptcy court and granted the authority to oversee the liquidation of Highway Generating Station and its assets.

In August, HGS announced it had sold the assets to ProEnergy Solutions, which is now dismantling the facility with plans to sell the assets, including buildings, plant components, poles and wires. The primary asset is the gas-fired turbine.

"Just a big waste basically," said Steven Blair, an Outback Power Crew foreman.

On Salem Road, about mile or so from the plant, Outback Power personnel were taking down power line and poles that had been put up to transmit the power to the electrical grid.

A total of 4.5 miles of electrical lines, 37 power poles, three A-frame structures, fiber optic cable and switching yards served the newly constructed plant.

They all need to come down.

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**Marshall Cripps of Outback Power Company prepares a high capacity transmission line for spooling as work gets underway dismantling the Highwood Generating Station east of Great Falls. (Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS)**

"Most of the time we're removing something if we rebuild new," said Brad Opp, another crew foreman. "Not something that's just four years (old)."

It's the end of the line for a controversial facility that started in 2004 as a proposal for a coal-fired power plant owned by rural electric cooperatives and the city of Great Falls. They wanted to produce their own power rather than purchase it on the market.

The decision to pursue a coal-fired plant set off years of fights with environmental groups, and also neighboring landowners and some Great Falls residents over zoning, air pollution and open records.

"It goes to show what your voice united can do," Bob Lassila said Thursday, when the crane positioned next to plant was visible from his farm two miles away.

Lassila and his son, Daryl, are organic farmers.

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**Bob Lassila, left, and his son Daryl talk about The Highwood Generating Station, which is being dismantled so that it can be shipped out of state after years of sitting idle a couple of miles from their farm east of Great Falls. (Photo: TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS)**

They opposed the coal-fired power plant and Cascade County's zoning decision allowing it, arguing the farm fields east of Great Falls weren't the right location for the industrial use.

"There's no sigh of relief," Bob Lassila said of the dismantling of the facility. "It's just a disappointment at the losses that different parties have experienced."

Daryl Lassila said he still runs into people today who congratulate him for opposing the coal-fired power plant, and for the Montana Supreme Court ruling in 2010 that Cascade County illegally rezoned 668 acres of land.

Southern eventually decided to build the much smaller, gas-fired power plant.

The Lassilas said it rarely operated.

The land where the plant sits hasn't been sold yet but will be, Swick said.

As part of the bankruptcy settlement, proceeds from the sale will be distributed to the parties that financed the plant, Swick said.

As part of the sale agreement, Swick, Southern and ProEnergy agreed to keep the sale amount confidential, Swick said.