



Ground broken for plant

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GREAT FALLS - Workers have begun construction of a cooling tower for a coal-fired power plant east of here.

A formal groundbreaking is planned for next week, but workers with Wickens Construction of Lewistown began some earth-moving work Wednesday.

"The time has come for us to break ground and move forward with construction," said Tim Gregori, the CEO of the Billings-based Southern Montana Electric Generation and Transmission.

Scrapers dug an area where the foundation of the Highwood Generating Station's cooling tower will be located on the 850-acre site.

"That's going to be the first major piece of equipment constructed," said Brad Schimke of Stanley Consultants, the engineering consultants on the project.

Gregori said the project is under a time crunch because construction must begin by Nov. 30 for its state air quality permit to remain valid. The first phase of work involves foundations, site preparation, water and sewer lines and portable water pipes, Gregori said.

Cascade County Commissioner Joe Briggs said the county must still approve a location conformance permit before structures can be built, but earth-moving activities are allowed.

The \$790 million plant would generate 250 megawatts of electricity for members of four rural electric cooperatives and possibly other customers.

The project is still being challenged in District Court on grounds the site was illegally rezoned from farmland to industrial.

SME, which intervened in the case on behalf of the county, argued that the lawsuit is moot because the land already was rezoned by the time SME bought it and opponents never asked

for an injunction to stop the project.

The county's position is that the acreage was properly rezoned.

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