

Power plants in East Contra County get formal notice of lawsuit threat

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Environmentalists filed notices Tuesday warning they would sue to force the owners of four existing and planned East Contra Costa power plants to protect rare plants and a butterfly and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In the endangered species notice, the environmental groups said emissions from four Antioch-area power plants -- two of which are not operational -- will increase nitrogen in the soil at Antioch Dunes National Wildlife Refuge, a preserve near the waterfront industrial area. The increased nitrogen helps weeds that crowd out native plants, including a plant needed by the Lange's metalmark butterfly, of which about 35 survive, according to environmentalists.

"We're not going to let this butterfly go down without a fight," said Brent Plater, executive director of the Wild Equity Institute, a new environmental group based in San Francisco.

The other groups in the lawsuit are the Center for Biological Diversity, which concentrates on endangered species, and Communities for a Better Environment, which focuses on pollution's effects on people. The concentration of power plants in East Contra Costa does harm to both, Plater said.

"The local communities and our most imperiled wildlife are being sacrificed," Plater said.

A PG&E spokeswoman said the two new power plants her company is connected to -- it owns one and has agreed to buy another -- are more environmentally friendly than old plants because they produce less

greenhouse gases per unit of energy and use dramatically less water for cooling.

"PG&E has and will continue to make great efforts to

protect the Lange's metalmark butterfly species," said spokeswoman Tamar Sarkissian.

The California Energy Commission had only recently received the notices and would not comment on them, according to spokeswoman Sandy Louey. A spokesman for one of the power plant operating companies, GenOn Energy, said he could not comment.

The environmentalists contend that steps taken to protect the butterfly and plants from extinction were inadequate.

The notices say that if their demands are not met, they will sue.

