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PG&E seeks Diablo Canyon license renewal

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Wednesday, November 25, 2009



Pacific Gas and Electric Co. announced Tuesday that it will try to renew the operating licenses of its Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant on the Central California coast, potentially keeping the facility open through 2045.

Diablo Canyon's twin reactors, located north of Avila Beach in San Luis Obispo County, have federal licenses to operate through 2024 and 2025. Together, they generate about 20 percent of the electricity PG&E customers use.

They do it while producing almost no greenhouse gases. PG&E executives said Tuesday that keeping the plant open will be essential to California's fight against global warming. The company, based in San Francisco, has applied to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission to extend the operating licenses by 20 years.

"We're taking a major step in building the framework for the state's energy future right here," said John Conway, PG&E's senior vice president for energy supply. "We simply cannot meet the goals of reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and supporting our economy without nuclear power."

The move had been widely expected, even if the timing took some by surprise. In recent years, PG&E has replaced Diablo Canyon's steam generators and built a facility on a nearby hillside to store the plant's radioactive waste.

Intense scrutiny

Many environmentalists fought the \$5.8 billion plant's construction, and the request for a license renewal will doubtless draw intense scrutiny. In addition to questions about safety, PG&E also will have to contend with proposed state rules that will restrict the ability of coastal power plants - even existing ones - to use large amounts of water for cooling, a process that can prove deadly to fish.

"Diablo has the waste issue, the cooling issue," said Jim Metropulos, senior advocate for the Sierra Club. "These are impacts on the environment that still need to be dealt with."

He said the group had not yet decided whether to oppose Diablo's license extensions. But PG&E's application was criticized Tuesday by one of California's top energy regulators.

James Boyd, vice chairman of the California Energy Commission, called the application premature. He said the company had ignored directions from the energy commission and the California Public Utilities Commission to conduct a thorough study of the economic and environmental costs and benefits of an extension before seeking one.

Public review

"The California Energy Commission is concerned that PG&E has not completed all of the studies ... nor have they provided state officials and the public an opportunity to review the overall economic and environmental costs and benefits of a license extension for Diablo Canyon," Boyd said in a written statement.

A PG&E spokeswoman said the company plans to file that information with the utilities commission early next year.

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