SLO Telegram-Tribune

14-year 'cover-up'

PG&E declined to pursue fault

By Carl Neiburger
Staff Writer

Pacific Gas and Electric Co. found evidence of an earthquake fault within 500 feet of the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant in 1967 but chose not to pursue it to avoid "additional speculation and possibly delay the project."

The information was revealed in a 14-year-old memorandum received by the Telegram-Tribune today.

The document described an April 20-21, 1967, meeting between PG&E and Atomic Energy Commission officials to discuss PG&E's proposal to build the Diablo plant.

The Atomic Energy Commission was the predecessor of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which now has charge of licensing nuclear power plants.

The memorandum said a "significant" fault had been found in the cliffs above Diablo Cove.

It said that PG&E geology consultant Richard H. Jahns theorized that "this large fault does not run through the site but probably passes to the northwest."

AEC officials "suggested that the exposed fault at the seawall be traced ... to establish its exact location in relation to the containment."

PG&E officials replied "they did not believe this was necessary and that further information of this type would only complicate a contested hearing."

The memo doesn't say how AEC officials responded to this, and NRC officials who attended the meeting said they didn't remember the discussion.

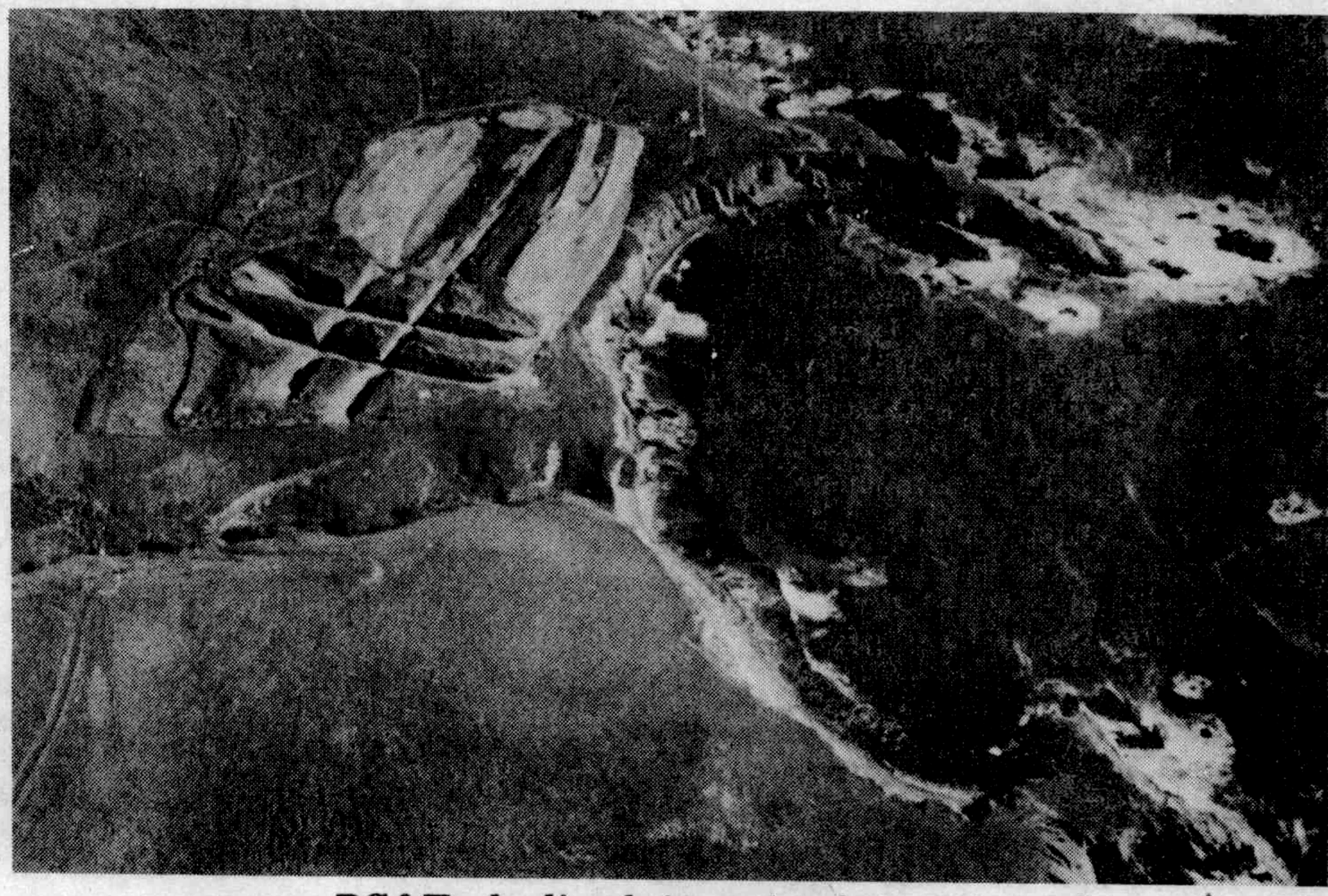
The hearing, at which PG&E was granted an AEC construction permit for the plant, was held Feb. 20 and 21, 1968. The permit was approved on April 23, 1968.

"It's a cover-up. Unbelievable," declared David S. Fleischaker, a lawyer for plant opponents.

"This, on top of the recent discoveries of design flaws, makes the prospects of the plant ever operating one day very frightening for the people of San Luis Obispo," he said.

"It shows the extent to which PG&E has gone to cover up problems of real safety."

Jahns, the geologist quoted in the memorandum, said the reason the fault wasn't researched further was that rock



PG&E declined to extend trenches shown in this 1967 photo of Diablo Canyon to trace a fault in cliffs near the mouth of Diablo Creek, to the lower right of the plant site, according to an AEC memo.

structures "indicated very clearly" that it had been inactive for the past 100,000 years.

Asked if he recalled any discussion of further trenching complicating a hearing, he said, "That may well have occurred during the meeting as an incidental thing."

Jahns said subsequent excavation during construction of the Diablo plant showed no evidence of active faults running beneath the plant.

The 1967 memorandum was written by Keith Woodard, an engineer who then worked with the AEC. He told a reporter he didn't remember writing that particular report, but his job at the time included sitting in on meetings concerning Diablo and taking notes.

"If it's got my name on it, I must have written it," said Woodard, who said he left the AEC about six months after the Diablo meeting and now works with a Washington, D.C., engineering firm.

Woodard said that when the memo was written, "There wasn't any cover-up intended," but, "The world has changed a lot in the last 15 years....

"When we were licensing these plants (then) we didn't spend anywhere near the amount of time on engineering problems that we do today."

The Telegram-Tribune contacted several other PG&E and NRC officials and consultants who were listed as attending the 1967 meeting. None were able to remember details of the session.

PG&E representative Suzanne G. Brown said she had asked PG&E engineers who attended the meeting to research their files for records of what happened.

Existence of the memorandum was reported by Stanley Mendes, a Santa Barbara structural engineer, who said it was obtained under a Freedom of Information Act request.

The fault described in the 1967 memorandum was discussed in more detail in PG&E testimony submitted for Diablo licensing hearings in December 1978.

The fault in question "appears on the sea cliff at the mouth of Diablo Canyon, trends northeast and projects toward the ground in the northernmost part of the power plant site," the 1978 report said.

It concluded that the fault wasn't important because microscopic studies had shown minimal evidence of movement.