Diablo quake study wanted

Blakelee will ask state to assess threat; possibility of converting it to gas raised

By Jeff Ballinger
The Tribune

Freshman Assemblyman Sam Blakelee this week will propose state backing for a study that would examine the threat of an earthquake fault to the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant.

Depending on the study’s findings, one result could be Diablo Canyon’s conversion from nuclear power to natural gas, he said.

Any changes in operations, however, would have to be supported by the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission and Pacific Gas and Electric Co., which owns the plant.

Blakelee, of San Luis Obispo, said he introduced a bill Thursday calling for the study to determine whether the Hosgri Fault just off the coast carries a big enough earthquake threat to the safety and viability of the plant.

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“We think this is a very costly and highly impractical idea that would create significant air pollution to replace a power plant that’s been declared seismically safe by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission,” said PG&E spokesman Jeff Lewis.

 Diablo Canyon, which underwent extensive earthquake study when it was in the licensing phase, is built to withstand a magnitude 7.5 quake on the Hosgri Fault, which lies about 3 miles offshore of the plant. The question of whether Diablo Canyon could withstand a major quake was rekindled a year ago in the wake of the 2003 San Simeon Earthquake.

While Blakelee acknowledged there have been thick “phone books” of studies performed by the NRC and other consultants on Diablo, he says the assessments have still fallen short in their scrutiny.

“The NRC says the plant is safe, but they don’t live here,” he said. “A study needs to be done to increase the public’s confidence.”

State Sen. Abel Maldonado criticized Blakelee’s proposal, citing a need to maintain the current operation of a facility that provides 1,300 jobs, significant tax revenue and an important portion of the state’s energy supply.

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Maldonado also said he will meet with Blakelee this week to discuss the proposal and his opposition to it. Both Maldonado and Blakelee have districts that include Diablo Canyon.

Blakelee insisted, however, that if a quake shuts down the plant, even temporarily, it would have an economic ripple effect locally and statewide.

“It occurs to me that we should first use the most advanced techniques possible to determine the risk to the plant,” he said.

Members of Mothers for Peace, a local nonprofit activist group on nuclear issues that has long opposed Diablo Canyon’s operation, agreed that an extensive study is long overdue.

“We’ve asked for that since 1974,” said Liz Appelberg, director of the group. “We have always been worried about that.”

Blakelee, a financial planner who also holds a doctorate in earthquake studies from UC Santa Barbara, will propose that the agencies with greatest oversight — the California Public Utilities Commission, the California Energy Commission and the California Independent System Operator — conduct the study.

If the review finds the potential for significant damage, he envisions the creation of a list of economic incentives for PG&E to convert the plant.

Blakelee said any alternatives produced by the study would be voluntary for PG&E.

The power to compel the company to take action could come only from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

“If that means that a voluntary agreement is reached, that would be fine. If not, then there is a more direct path forward,” he said.

“That’s why I’m seeking to create a voluntary consensus and provide information on the risks and the opportunities — so PG&E can make the decision,” he said.

Blakelee said he has spoken with PG&E and governmental officials in Sacramento and that his feedback has helped shape his proposal. He declined to characterize their reaction to the plan.

“It’s too early to tell what such a study could cost, Blakelee said.

“There is just a prudent contingency analysis of what could happen and what your options are.”

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Tribune reporter Nick Wilson contributed to this story.