



Wednesday, Mar 31, 2010

Posted on Sat, Mar. 13, 2010

Editorial: What's the hurry with Diablo Canyon relicensing?

A legitimate question has been raised about the relicensing of the Diablo Canyon Power Plant: What's the hurry?

The current licenses for the plant's two units don't expire until 2024 and 2025 — 14 and 15 years from now. Yet Pacific Gas & Electric is unwilling to postpone the application process to allow time for 3-D mapping of earthquake faults near the plant, including the Shoreline Fault discovered in 2008.

PG&E officials have a valid concern about timing: They want to know at least 10 years in advance if the requests to extend the licenses are going to be denied. And if they wait until a three-year mapping study is complete before they start the permitting process — which could take at least two years — they would be cutting it close.

We understand why PG&E needs to have plenty of notice if NRC denies the permit application. The utility needs at least 10 years to develop a replacement for the power generated by Diablo, which supplies about 10 percent of the state's electricity.

Yet we wonder, shouldn't some agency — PG&E, say, or the California Energy Commission — already have a plan in place, in the event that Diablo Canyon or some other major producer were to be knocked out of commission by an emergency?

If not, that's a glaring deficiency in our state's emergency preparedness. Here's our concern about the early licensing of Diablo:

Before any public agency reviews an application — be it for a one-car garage or a 500-home subdivision — we believe it's important to have all relevant data on hand.

We're puzzled, then, why the Nuclear Regulatory Commission would consider something as crucial as the relicensing of Diablo Canyon before it has a complete report on the newly discovered Shoreline Fault.

NRC officials assure us that they have the power to order changes — indeed, to shut down the plant — at any time, should new information raise concern about its ability to withstand an earthquake.

From a safety standpoint, that's highly reassuring.

But from an economic standpoint, rushing the review doesn't add up.

If there's even a miniscule chance that the seismic study turns up some data that could affect the plant's future, we believe it would make sense to know that before PG&E sinks \$85 million into the application process.

Diablo officials don't expect the study to turn up much new information about the Shoreline Fault, because the topography of the area doesn't lend itself to that sort of study. Also, the utility points to preliminary data indicating that the Shoreline Fault could produce a 6.1-magnitude quake — far below the 7.5 that the plant was built to withstand.

But not everyone shares PG&E's level of confidence.

Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee, who has a doctorate in earthquakes, has been perhaps the biggest proponent of 3-D mapping near Diablo.

While he has not taken a position on whether the licensing should be delayed, he vehemently disagrees with the assertion that conditions at the Shoreline Fault aren't conducive to 3-D mapping. He believes the study

should answer questions about how close the fault comes to the plant. Blakeslee, in fact, began calling for the 3-D studies as far back as 2005 — pointing out then that there would be plenty of time to complete the work before the relicensing hearings.

In retrospect, it's unfortunate that PG&E didn't act on the suggestion then. Now, PG&E is looking at the three-year timetable for the mapping.

Here's the breakdown it provided:

- One year to obtain state and federal permits, which are needed because the survey activities can affect marine animals.
- One year to do the survey work.
- One year to interpret results, integrate them with other studies, and write a report.

Blakeslee questions whether the work will take that long; a couple of consultants he contacted said it would take around a year to complete the work.

Given the discrepancy, we believe it's worth looking at whether the project could be expedited.

If significant progress could be made within, say, 12 to 18 months, wouldn't it be worth delaying the application process?

Given that the Diablo Canyon Power Plant could be operating another 35 years, we don't believe a one- or two-year delay to gather all relevant information is out of the question. We strongly urge the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to consider that when it decides whether to postpone the licensing process until the results of 3-D mapping are complete.