NRC: Diablo quake probability too low for emergency plan

By Carl Neiburger
Staff Writer

The probability of an earthquake being severe enough to cause an accident at the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant is too low to merit consideration in county nuclear emergency plans, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has ruled.

If an earthquake did cause severe damage to both the Pacific Gas and Electric Co. plant and its surroundings, however, there would be little that an emergency plan could do, the commission said:

"Emergency response would have marginal benefit because of its impairment by offsite (earthquake) damage."

The commission's assessment of how earthquakes could affect emergency plans came in a decision released last Friday along with an order authorizing full-power operation of the Diablo Canyon plant.

While ruling out specific consideration of how earthquakes could affect Diablo Canyon emergency plans, the commission told its staff to develop general rules on earthquakes and emergency planning for nationwide consideration.

The decision was approved by three of the five commissioners - Chairman Nunzio J. Palladino, Thomas M. Roberts and Frederick M. Bernthal. Commissioner Lando W. Zech Jr. abstained.

Commissioner James K. Asselstine sharply dissented, accusing the commission of avoiding the issue of earthquakes and emergency planning and depriving Diablo critics of the opportunity to raise it during hearings.

"The commission's decision ignores fundamental principles of emergency planning, offends common sense and abuses the legal process." - James K. Asselstine

The commission overruled the licensing board and asked its staff to develop rules governing earthquakes and emergency planning at all nuclear plants nationwide.

The action effectively precluded a hearing board assigned to Diablo Canyon from considering the issue in January 1982 hearings.

The NRC staff issued a report a year ago, saying that nationwide rules were unnecessary because of the low probability of earthquakes in most parts of the country. It said each plant should be considered individually.

The commission last April then asked parties to the Diablo proceeding whether the effect of earthquakes on emergency planning should be considered at Diablo Canyon after all.

Mothers for Peace said it should because earthquakes are a significant safety issue at Diablo Canyon.

PG&E said the emergency plans were designed to be flexible enough to deal with all contingencies, and modifying them to emphasize one kind of danger could reduce the ability to deal with others.

The NRC staff argued that the possibility of an earthquake coinciding with a radiation release was too unlikely to require consideration.

The commission majority said it agreed with its staff, adding that even if an earthquake caused both a radiation release and extensive damage to the surrounding area, there would be little that emergency planning could do to remedy the problem.

Commissioner Bernthal, in a statement attached to the majority opinion, said NRC licensing and appeal boards had already concluded that the plant's design "is adequate to prevent a radiological release from the most severe earthquake that could reasonably be postulated in the vicinity of Diablo Canyon."

He said his review of a 200-year record of earthquakes near the site "indicates that there have been only two events in all of that time which had the potential for any, let alone major, disruption of emergency response activities."

A Bernthal aide said those events were the 1852 San Luis Obispo earthquake and the 1910 Avila Beach earthquake.

Asselstine contended, however, that to argue that the probability of earthquakes is low in California, "where almost 90 percent of the seismic activity in the United States occurs and where earthquakes which damage, obstruct or disrupt roads, buildings, bridges and communications networks occur with some regularity, simply ignores common sense."

He said Diablo Canyon should have contingency plans for coping with earthquake damage even if it doesn't result in a radiation release.

The commission, by waiving on the issue, prevented Diablo Canyon and San Onofre licensing boards from conducting hearings which would have taken a week each, at the longest, Asselstine said.