

Kern hydrogen power plant clears one hurdle

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SACRAMENTO -- The preliminary staff assessment (PSA) for the proposed 250-megawatt Hydrogen Energy California project in western Kern County has cleared one of the initial hurdles toward possible approval by the California Energy Commission.

The Hydrogen Energy International LLC project is a joint venture between European oil giant BP p.l.c. of London and mining company Rio Tinto plc, headquartered in Melbourne, Australia and London, England.

Here's how the company describes the plant: "The proposed plant, which will be located nearby the existing Elk Hills oil field, plans to use petcoke with coal and non-potable water and convert them to hydrogen and carbon dioxide, or CO₂.

"The hydrogen will then be used to fuel a combined cycle power plant to generate low-carbon electricity. Ninety-percent of the CO₂ will be captured during steady state operations and sent via pipeline and injected deep below ground in oil reservoirs within the Elk Hills oil field for enhanced oil recovery and permanent storage."

In the first part of the PSA, Commission staff concluded that with the implementation of recommended mitigation measures, the proposed project would not have significant adverse direct, indirect or cumulative environmental impacts in the areas of air quality, efficiency, facility design, geology and paleontology, hazardous materials, noise and vibration, public health, reliability, socioeconomic resources, traffic and transportation, transmission line safety nuisance, transmission safety engineering, worker safety and fire protection.

Still to be resolved are the areas of biological resources, cultural resources, soil and water resources, visual resources, land use, and waste management. These are to be addressed in the second part of the PSA, which is scheduled for release in early October. Part Two will also include an analysis of the project alternatives and the greenhouse gas emissions appendix, which will include an analysis of the carbon dioxide enhanced oil recovery and the sequestration proposal.

The PSA serves as the staff's initial evaluation of the environmental, engineering, and public health and safety impacts of the proposed facility. There will be a public comment period and a community workshop on the document. After both parts of the PSA are issued, a final staff assessment (FSA) will be released. The FSA will serve as staff's testimony at the evidentiary hearings by the committee of two commissioners reviewing the proposed project.

The proposed facility will be located on a 473-acre site currently used for agricultural purposes. The project site is located approximately seven miles west of Bakersfield near the town of Tupman.

If licensed by the Energy Commission, the facility would begin construction in December 2011 with commercial operation starting September 2015.