

Seismic safety at Diablo Canyon discussed

After 2 days of presentations on how quakes might affect plant, some attendees are still uneasy

David Sneed, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 9-9-10

About 125 people turned out in San Luis Obispo for a two-day workshop — which occasionally turned contentious — about earthquake science and how it relates to Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant.

The workshop was intended to be a crash course about earthquakes, how they are measured and how nuclear power plants are designed to withstand them.

However, questions and comments from the audience frequently veered into familiar controversies, such as license renewal, recurring safety problems at the plant and the need for more renewable energy in the state.

State Sen. Sam Blakeslee, R-San Luis Obispo, who has authored several pieces of legislation about seismic and nuclear safety, set the tone for the second day of the event.

He encouraged federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials to “go beyond a check-the-box approach” to renewing the plant’s two licenses for another 20 years each.

Such an approach is how catastrophes such as the recent oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico occur, Blakeslee said. Seismic safety at Diablo Canyon is “a very momentous issue,” about which the public is “rightfully concerned,” he said.

Earthquakes became the foremost safety concern at Diablo Canyon during its construction when the Hosgri Fault was discovered offshore.

Retrofitting the plant to deal with this new threat was partly responsible for adding several years and \$5 billion to the construction cost.

Concern was heightened even more when a new geologic feature, the Shoreline Fault, was discovered just offshore in 2008.

Plant owner Pacific Gas and Electric Co. is conducting high-definition mapping of the new fault, which is expected to be complete at the end of 2013.

PG&E and NRC seismologists have preliminarily determined that the plant could withstand a quake from the Shoreline Fault and that the Hosgri Fault continues to pose the main earthquake threat.

They also said that the level of seismic review at Diablo Canyon exceeds that of any other nuclear plant in the nation.

Several speakers at the workshop asked why license renewal would not be suspended until those studies are complete.

Annie Kammerer, an NRC seismologist, said earthquake monitoring is continuous at the plant and outside the

parameters of license renewal.

Other members of the public complained that the presentations were overly technical, that NRC facilitators were rude and that NRC and PG&E officials often deflected questions and were arrogant.

“None of our questions were directly answered,” said Eric Greening of Atascadero, a full-time government watchdog and prolific commenter at public meetings.

NRC officials apologized if any of the speakers had acted arrogantly.

Norm Abrahamson, Diablo Canyon’s lead seismic expert, said the presentations were intentionally technical and detailed in hopes that university professors and local officials would become sources of seismic information.