

PG&E delays licensing to study Diablo Canyon fault

David R. Baker, San Francisco Chronicle, 4-12-11

Bowing to pressure from government officials, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. has asked federal regulators to delay relicensing the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant until the company finishes in-depth studies of a recently discovered earthquake fault.

The utility, California's largest, has asked the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to postpone making a final decision on the company's request to extend the licenses of Diablo's two reactors.

The company plans to conduct advanced seismic studies of the nearby Shoreline Fault, studies that may take until December 2015 to complete.

Little is known about the fault, first identified in 2008. Ever since an earthquake and tsunami crippled a nuclear plant in Japan last month, a growing number of California officials have demanded that PG&E conduct further studies on the Shoreline Fault before pressing ahead with license renewal. Diablo Canyon sits on a seismically active stretch of the Central California coast near San Luis Obispo.

"We recognize that many in the public have called for this research to be completed before the NRC renews the plant's licenses," said John Conway, the San Francisco company's chief nuclear officer.

He said the studies would help assure regulators and the plant's neighbors that the facility is safe.

California state Sen. Sam Blakeslee, who trained as a geophysicist, had demanded that PG&E perform those studies before Diablo's operating licenses could be renewed. He wrote a bill in 2009 that would have forced PG&E to conduct the studies, but it was vetoed by then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"I commend PG&E for taking the responsible action of delaying relicensing until critical seismic questions are answered," said Blakeslee, R-San Luis Obispo.

The Diablo reactors' current licenses expire in 2024 and 2025.