

Public turns out for San Onofre meeting

Activist pushes for better earthquake studies before renewing reactor's license

Paul Sisson, Escondido North County Times, 4-8-11

The message at a nuclear information meeting Thursday was simple: Keep the pressure on the state to require a comprehensive earthquake study before agreeing to re-license California's existing nuclear reactors including the two at San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

The political action group Organizing For America sponsored the informational meeting on nuclear power at the Oceanside Public Library and invited Rochelle Becker, president of the Alliance for Nuclear Responsibility to be its main speaker.

The alliance, an anti-nuclear group, has said for years that plants like San Onofre should be required to do sophisticated new seismic studies of earthquake faults before being allowed to ask for 20-year license extensions from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Becker urged about 70 people in the audience Thursday night to write letters to Gov. Jerry Brown, the California Energy Commission and other agencies demanding that deep-water, three-dimensional seismic studies be performed so the state can better understand the seismic risk involved in having reactors, and the waste they generate, on an earthquake-prone coast.

So far, Southern California Edison, the company that runs San Onofre, has asked the California Public Utilities Commission for millions of dollars to study re-licensing the plant and to do a full seismic study. But nuclear activists want the seismic study completed first, before the re-licensing applications are made. Becker made the case that, given the ongoing nuclear crisis in Japan, better understanding the risk of earthquakes near California's nuclear plants should be first on the to-do list.

"We will live with earthquakes in California," Becker said. "But we won't live with radioactive earthquakes if we can help it."

The message seemed to resonate with many in the crowd, like Rena Morrocco of Vista, who said she planned to take Becker's lead and lobby her representatives to make sure the studies get done.

"I think there is a lot more concern because of what is happening in Japan," Morrocco said, adding that she has been reading up on safer versions of nuclear power in addition to checking out what the activists are saying.

Tim Pendleton, a librarian from Oceanside, said he too will send a letter, and that he was motivated to attend Thursday's meeting by the crisis in Japan.

"That situation over there reminded me that we've got a problem here with nuclear reactors near earthquake faults," Pendleton said.

Others in the audience were not so sure a letter-writing campaign was enough.

Kevin Beiser, a member of the San Diego Unified School District board, said he believed that California's two nuclear plants, San Onofre and the Diablo Canyon plant near San Luis Obispo, ought to be shut down, drawing applause from many in the audience. He said the ballot box is the best way to reach that goal.

"I think we really ought to start thinking about a statewide ballot initiative," Beiser said.