

Cobb Mountain group files suit against geothermal expansion

Glenda Anderson, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, 6-3-11

Cobb Mountain residents are suing Lake County in connection with the planned expansion of a nearby geothermal energy facility.

A citizens group, Friends of Cobb Mountain, claims the environmental impact report on expansion of the Bottle Rock Power Plant is inadequate.

The report fails to adequately address noise, heavy industrial traffic and the exposure of local residents to the rotten egg odor of hydrogen sulfide gas, said Hamilton Hess, chairman of the group.

The group is asking the court to set aside certification of the impact report.

“It should be said we’re not opposed to the project itself,” he said.

Both the Lake County county planning commission and board of supervisors approved the impact report.

Bottle Rock officials said they will do everything necessary to mitigate the effects of the expansion.

“We do feel (the environmental report) is adequate,” said Bottle Rock General Manager Brian Harms.

Bottle Rock is a dry steam geothermal power plant that sits on 350 acres in the Geysers straddling Lake and Sonoma counties, the largest producing geothermal region in the world.

It currently produces about 11 megawatts — roughly enough energy to supply 8,250 households — a day. It has 20 wells on the property it leases but only eight currently are operational.

The expansion allows for 11 new wells, but they won’t be drilled or used at once, Harms said.

The new wells are expected to allow the plant to eventually run at its fully permitted level — 55 megawatts, Harms said.

Supervisor Rob Brown said he believes the report adequately addresses the expansion’s impacts but also understands concerns raised by Cobb Mountain residents.

He said Bottle Rock officials did not reach out to nearby residents until after they complained to supervisors about traffic and noise problems from the company’s existing operations. The company purchased the mothballed facility and restarted operations in 2007.

“They had in the past, legitimate concerns,” Brown said of Cobb residents.