

How shaky is Diablo's ground?

Rochelle M. Becker, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 3-10-10

Becker is executive director of the Alliance for Nuclear Responsibility

The Alliance for Nuclear Responsibility has spent years participating in state oversight meetings to monitor California's concern over dependence on aging reactors located within 3 miles of two active earthquake faults, and the completion of state-required studies to resolve these concerns.

Our request is simple and straightforward: PG&E should immediately follow state requirements to begin 3-D seismic reflection mapping and other advanced seismic techniques that have the full support of the entire California Legislature and Energy Commission. Afterward, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the U.S. Geological Survey and state seismic oversight agencies should conduct an independent peer review of PG&E's data to determine if it is in the best interest of the state to allow Diablo Canyon to operate and produce and store waste within 3 miles of two active earthquake faults.

Contrary to the views of PG&E vice president James Becker (Tribune, March 7), any other action is premature and financially risky.

In fact, PG&E's 2006 estimate of \$4-6 million to complete the license application process has now ballooned into \$85 million in PG&E's recent filing to have their ratepayers fund the application process (testimony of James Becker June 20, 2006, CPUC Transcript 07-03-044).

PG&E appears to believe that "in order to participate in the rigorous local, state and federal regulatory processes and have a final decision within that time frame, we must start now."

Yet this week the Alliance for Nuclear Responsibility was asked personally by NRC Chairman Gregory Jaczko if we knew "why" PG&E had filed prematurely in November 2009, as both the chair and his staff seemed surprised. So the Alliance questions the veracity of Mr. Becker's statement. According to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission timeline presented in San Luis Obispo, the license renewal process could be completed by September of 2011, hardly the "several years" Mr. Becker states in his viewpoint.

On July 16, 2007, an earthquake on a known but unstudied fault off the coast of Japan shut down the world's largest nuclear power plant in less than two minutes. 8,000 megawatts of power was lost and only two of seven reactors were recently restored at a cost of more than \$10 billion, resulting in Japan's inability to meet its Kyoto protocol goals.

So, PG&E's claim for Diablo that it avoids "... adding more than 7 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions that would likely otherwise be produced by conventional, fossil fuel-burning plants" could quickly become a liability if California, like Japan, fails to follow up on new seismic information that Mother Nature has been hinting to us with increasing frequency from Humboldt to Chile, Haiti and Taiwan.

While the NRC's generic environmental impact review does not require a seismic review at all reactor sites, both Diablo Canyon and San Onofre are singled out as special circumstances. The NRC is certainly not precluded from investigating new and ongoing seismic information, as the NRC made clear in our meeting on March 4. So questions of seismicity can and should fall within the parameters of the NRC's license renewal process.

It is true that “PG&E recently asked the California Public Utilities Commission to approve funding for the company to conduct a 3-D seismic survey of the region.” However, the request for expedited funding was not accompanied by a promise of expedited results. The Alliance will support PG&E’s expedited funding for results completed quickly, but not two years after they receive NRC approval for a 20-year license renewal — which is PG&E’s current completion date.

Let’s quit playing games. PG&E’s in-house geoscientists have a fractured history that demands independent oversight — well documented in The Tribune’s own headlines from the 1970s and 1980s. Its license does not expire until 2025, and squandering ratepayer money today without the most current seismic knowledge available is an affront to hardworking men and women who rely upon PG&E to provide reasonable and reliable (CPUC jurisdiction), and safe and secure (NRC jurisdiction) generation.

The Alliance is happy to “thank the men and women of Diablo Canyon committed to earning our support each and every day,” but we fail to see what that has to do with our demand that management and the PG&E seismic team roll up their sleeves and get to work to complete seismic studies the state has required before spending another cent of ratepayer dollars toward license renewal.