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PG&E Quietly Seeking Permission to Extend Diablo Canyon's License

The utility wants the government's licensing review to proceed before seismic studies are completed
By: [John Upton, The Bay Citizen \(http://s.tt/12jrO\)](http://s.tt/12jrO)

Pacific Gas and Electric Company is quietly seeking a 20-year extension of its license to operate the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, despite publicly requesting the process be delayed until studies of the facility's ability to withstand an earthquake are completed.

The discrepancy between the company's public and private stance has led some lawmakers and environment advocates to accuse PG&E of misleading the public about its plans for the San Luis Obispo plant following last month's devastating earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in Japan.

On April 10, PG&E asked the National Regulatory Commission to postpone relicensing its Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant until the company completes studies of a seismic fault that runs within 330 yards of the facility.

“In the aftermath of the Japanese earthquake and the resulting tsunami, we are working even more closely with various governmental permitting agencies to accelerate the plant’s advanced seismic research,” PG&E’s Chief Nuclear Officer John Conway said in a [press release](#) one day after the [April 10 letter](#) was sent to the NRC.

“As PG&E works toward this objective, we are asking the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to withhold issuance of PG&E’s renewed operating licenses, if approved, until after this research is completed and the findings are submitted to the commission,” Conway stated.

The utility's critics and lawmakers praised the delay.

But on April 12, PG&E sent a [clarifying letter](#) to the NRC, which it did not publicize with a press release, asking agency staff to move forward with safety and environmental reviews associated with relicensing efforts before the company’s seismic studies are completed.

“PG&E has not requested any suspension or delay in the NRC Staff’s ongoing safety and environmental reviews,” PG&E attorney David Repka wrote in the April 12 letter. “PG&E also is not requesting any delay in the schedule for this licensing hearing process.”

Liz Apfelberg, a member of Mothers For Peace, which has long led protests against construction at Diablo Canyon, accused PG&E of taking a “sneaky” approach to public relations by sending the second, unpublicized letter.

NRC spokesman Victor Dricks this week confirmed that the agency is moving forward with safety and other reviews of the Diablo Canyon facility in preparation for a ruling on PG&E's request for permit extensions.

“We’re continuing our review,” Dricks said.

PG&E spokesman Paul Flake said the NRC’s safety review of Diablo Canyon and the company’s planned seismic studies “don’t have any connection with one another.”

Sen. Sam Blakeslee (R-San Luis Obispo), a geophysicist with a doctorate in earthquake studies whose district includes the nuclear power plant, said it's impossible for the NRC to "credibly perform" safety studies required for the extension of Diablo Canyon's operating permits without first reviewing the results of PG&E's planned seismic studies.

"It seems utterly contradictory," Blakeslee said.

The Diablo Canyon plant lies next to the Shoreline Fault, which was discovered in 2008. Seismologists know little about the fault, including whether it is connected to other faults in the region. Some fear that its rupture could severely damage Diablo Canyon, causing a catastrophic nuclear meltdown.

PG&E says the seismic studies of the 1980s-era power plant will be completed by the end of 2015. The plant's operating permit expires in 2025, and PG&E has asked the NRC to extend it by 20 years.

At a hearing on April 14 before the Senate Energy Committee, officials for the NRC testified that Diablo Canyon is considered safe, because no data exists indicating otherwise.

But federal lawmakers are aware of the potential safety threats.

"We are particularly interested in the safety of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, located in San Clemente, and the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant near San Luis Obispo, both of which are near earthquake faults," senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein wrote in a March 16 letter to the NRC. "We ask that the National Regulatory Commission (NRC) perform a thorough inspection at these two plants to evaluate their safety and emergency preparedness plans."

More recently, Feinstein asked the NRC to assess seismic and tsunami hazards, operational issues, plant security, emergency preparedness and spent fuel storage before it relicenses nuclear power plants.

"I believe that our understanding of many threats – especially seismic threats, tsunami threats, spent fuel risks, and terrorist threats – has improved dramatically since most nuclear power plants were originally designed and licensed thirty or more years ago," Feinstein wrote in the [April 20 letter](#) to NRC Chairman Gregory Jaczko. "Relicensing these facilities offers a unique opportunity to review the original assessment of potential threats, in order to ensure that a facility is designed to endure all threats safely."