

Hearing on proposed Utah nuke plant zeroes in on water needs

Energy » Critics say river lacks needed water for a plant that could hire more than 1,000 workers.

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 01/13/2010 07:44:49 AM

Green River » A proposed nuclear power plant that could be built just outside this Emery County town in southern Utah would provide more than 1,000 long-term, high-paying jobs.

At the peak of construction, it could require 4,000 workers, according to Utah-based Blue Castle Holdings, which is heading the project. If approved, it would be an economic boon like Emery County has never seen.

That's why Green River resident JoAnn Williams supports building a 3,000 megawatt plant that would require 50,000 acre feet of water per year from the Green River. (An acre foot is 326,000 gallons.)

Williams was among those who attended a hearing in Green River on water issues related to the plant Tuesday. "We need economic stability," she said in an interview. "And we don't have any growth here in Green River. The plant would be good for us."

Environmentalists, farmers, recreation entities, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service raised a host of issues at the hearing, conducted by the Utah Division of Water Rights. They include potential impacts on stream flows and endangered fish species, among others. They also questioned the project's economically feasibility.

Tuesday's hearing focused on an application by water conservancy districts in Kane and San Juan counties for diversion changes so their down-river water rights can be used in Green River for the plant.

The water would be completely dissipated and not returned to the river.

Kane and San Juan have leased those water rights to Blue Castle for 40 years. If the plant goes online, Kane County will earn about \$1 million per year, while San Juan will take about in \$800,000 annually. The contracts can be renewed for an additional 30 years.

The hearing attracted folks like long-time Green River melon farmer Nancy Dunham, who believes the proposed plant requires too much water from a source that might already be over-allocated.

"Why take our water?" she said. "That's our life blood."

Dunham and others questioned whether there would be enough water in dry years to operate the plant and still provide water to farmers and others.

Former Utah Water Engineer Jerry Olds, who now works as a water consultant and has been retained by Blue Castle, told John Mann, the assistant state water engineer who conducted the hearing, there was enough water in the Green River for the plant.

During an average year, it would require less than 2 percent of the river's 3.9 million acre feet. But during a year like 2002, the second lowest year on record for the Green, it would take 10 percent of the river's water.

Teresa Butler of Moab's Red River Canoe Co. said even if the plant doesn't significantly deplete river water, it will harm the area's recreation economy. "Who wants to take a raft trip down river from a nuclear power plant?" she said. "It's like a "Simpsons" episode in the making."

But Moab businessman Randy Day disagreed.

"It's a fabulous thing for this area," he said. "There is a perception about what it would do to the melons, but this is the safest source of power there is."

John Flitton, an attorney representing HEAL Utah, an environmental group protesting the diversion application, contended the water diversion could spell trouble in years ahead. "This impacts all water users back to Flaming Gorge Dam. Each water user will have to relinquish water to keep the nuclear power facility from having a meltdown [during dry years]."

But Nils Diaz, a former director of the NRC who has been retained by Blue Castle, said there is virtually no danger of that. He said nuclear plants deal with water shortfalls and other things, like hurricanes, without calamity.

And Olds, the former state water engineer, told Mann that Utah's water laws would systematically protect water users with senior rights during drought years.

Blue Castle CEO Aaron Tilton said power use projections show that by 2020, electricity will be in high demand and markets in the western United States will purchase power from the plant.

There is no announced deadline for the Division of Water Rights to determine whether the change applications will be granted.

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