

Report a 'major milestone' for Calpine

Concerns remain over plant's pollution levels, water usage, but panel recommends approval

By Matt Carter, Tri Valley Herald STAFF WRITER

TRACY -- Build a 1,100-megawatt power plant, and it will pollute the air, consume millions of gallons of water and, in some people's eyes, be something of an eyesore.

Those are three areas where the California Energy Commission thinks Calpine Corp. can improve its plan for a massive natural gas-fired power plant between Livermore and Tracy.

In a report issued last week, Energy Commission staff members said Calpine's East Altamont Energy Center is needed, and that the state should approve it -- if Calpine takes a few more steps to reduce its impacts.

Local residents will have a chance to comment on the report -- issued 15 months into what was supposed to be a yearlong licensing process -- at a series of workshops in Tracy and Sacramento between Oct. 4 and Oct. 8.

The workshops are a prelude to formal hearings in Sacramento the following week that will guide the Energy Commission in ruling on Calpine's application. A proposed ruling is expected in December.

Dave Crespo, Calpine's community outreach coordinator for the project, called the report "a major milestone for the project and for Calpine.

"There was a certain amount of relief that the (report) was produced and that they've recommended to the commissioners that the project go forward, albeit with certain conditions," Crespo said. "We look forward to resolving outstanding issues."

Most of the unresolved issues fall into three areas: air pollution, water consumption and the power plant's visual impacts.

Calpine has made progress in solving one potential deal killer -- how it will supply 4,600 acre feet of water needed each year to cool the plant's generating turbines. One acre foot is 325,851 gallons, or enough water to supply about three families for a year.

The Energy Commission, along with the state Department of Water Resources, had questioned Calpine's deal with the Byron Bethany Irrigation District to supply the water.

Although the irrigation district claimed the right to divert up to 60,000 acre feet per year from the State Water Project, it has historically drawn less than that for its customers, who are mostly farmers. The irrigation district hasn't drawn more than 50,000 acre feet from the state water project since 1977, and last exceeded 40,000 acre feet in 1990.

Under water rights dating to before 1914, it was unclear exactly how much

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Calpine opposed to setting 2020 deadline

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water the district was entitled to, state officials said.

So the Byron Bethany Irrigation District signed off on an agreement that would formally entitle it to 50,000 acre feet per year. The Department of Water Resources is close to following suit, said Dan Flory, chief of the State Water Project Analysis Office.

But the Energy Commission may also require Calpine to gradually switch the plant over to recycled water from the planned community of Mountain House. When it opens in 2005, the Energy Commission report recommends that the power plant should be getting about one-fifth of its cooling water in the form of highly treated sewage wastewater from Mountain House.

By 2020, if Mountain House grows as expected, recycled water from the development should be able to meet all of the power plant's water needs, the report said.

Over the plant's expected 30-year lifespan, it will cost Calpine about \$5 million more to use recycled instead of fresh water, the report estimated.

Although Calpine has designed the East Altamont Energy Center with the intention of using recycled water from Mountain House, the company is opposed to setting a deadline of 2020 for getting all of its water that way, Crespo said.

Although the water and sewer district serving Mountain House has stated its commitment to supplying the power plant with all the recycled water it needs, a formal agreement hasn't been reached with the Byron Bethany Irrigation District, which would deliver the water to Calpine.

"Finding a mechanism for satisfying the Energy Commissions concerns ... that (recycled water is) definitely going to happen has been challenging," Crespo said.

Although natural-gas plants are cleaner than diesel- or oil-fired plants, they still produce air pollution. Calpine proposes satisfying regulatory requirements by buying pollution "credits" from other Bay Area firms to offset the more than 500 tons of air pollutants it is estimated the plant will produce each year.

Calpine proposes buying emission credits that will, in theory, cut an estimated 836 tons of air pollution each year in other places. Since a majority of the reductions would happen elsewhere in the Bay Area -- some as far away as San Jose and Redwood City -- the Energy Commission report recommends that Calpine be required to buy an additional 225 tons of credits to reduce pollution in the Tracy-Livermore area.

On Thursday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District approved an agreement with Calpine in which the company will pay the air district \$1 million for pollution reduction programs.

Although the project is technically in the jurisdiction of the neighboring Bay Area Air Quality Management District, Calpine agreed to make the payment after the San Joaquin Valley air district gained legal standing in the Energy Commission licensing process.

In determining that Calpine should pay \$1 million, the San Joaquin Valley air district gave the company credit for emission credits the company was purchasing within 50 miles of the air district's jurisdiction. It then calculated that Calpine should pay to mitigate for 67 tons of emissions per year, at a cost of \$15,000 per ton.

If, as recommended in the Energy Commission report, Calpine does buy additional pollution credits in the Tracy-Livermore area, it will still have to make the \$1 million payment, said Seyed Sadredin, director of permit services for the San Joaquin Valley air district.

"The contract established the mini-mum obligation we feel Calpine has to mitigate," Sadredin said. Rather than the payment being reduced, "I feel a more likely scenario is that the Energy Commission, before they license the plant, says that Calpine has to provide more funds (to the San Joaquin air district) to generate reductions."

As for the visual impacts of the plant, there's not a lot that can be done to hide three 175-foot-tall smokestacks and a 57-foot-tall cooling tower.

Calpine was forced to scale back its original landscaping plan because wildlife regulators feared that planting trees around the plant would provide perching spots for raptors that would prey on the protected San Joaquin Kit Fox.

The report concluded that the plant's appearance is the project's only environmental impact that cannot be remedied to become "less than significant."

That's a sentiment expressed by Gary and Dolores Kuhn, who are neighbors of the project, in comments to the Energy Commission.

"Calpine can debate all they want on what kind of tree or landscaping is going to do the best job," the couple said. The "bottom line is there is no tree or landscaping that can hide the enormous size of this plant."

The California Energy Commission will hold workshops on Calpine's proposed East Altamont Energy Center from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday, Oct. 4, and Tuesday, Oct. 8, at Elks Lodge No. 2031, 6400 E. 11th St., Tracy. For more information, contact Roberta Mendonca at (916) 654-4489.

Family plays Jetsons

By ERIN WALDNER, Bakersfield Californian staff writer

Jeannine Mountain gets more than a few stares when she takes her new car out for a spin. "There's always this look of perplexed bewilderment," said Mountain, who calls Bakersfield home. "It looks like a souped-up golf cart."

People invariably ask her what she's driving.

An electric car, she answers. Mountain and her family are the proud owners of a four-passenger Ford Think.

It's fully powered by an electric engine. There's no emissions and no vroom-vroom noise coming from the motor. "It sounds like a Jetson car," Mountain said.

"It's fun," Mountain said. "We really, really enjoy it."

So do the kids in the neighborhood. They clamor for rides on weekends.

The car plugs into any standard 110-voltage outlet for charging. A full charge takes four to six hours and adds just 50 cents to her electric bill.

The Ford Think comes in two models, the "Think city" and the "Think neighbor."

Mountain and her husband, who have three young sons, opted for the latter.

The Think neighbor is designed for just that -- driving around the neighborhood. It tops out at 25 mph and has a range of 30 miles without requiring a full charge.

Mountain mostly uses it to drive her children to and from school and soccer practice and for trips to the store. She also uses it for her gourmet food business.

She doesn't leave her neighborhood. When needed, she pulls over to let other drivers pass her on the street.

The car has a small trunk, perfect, Mountain said, for storing four gallons of milk, soccer balls and the kids' backpacks.

Mountain and her husband first spotted an electric car when camping in Pismo Beach.

"We thought, 'Wow, that's kind of interesting,'" Mountain said.

They thought it might fit the bill for a second family car, something Mountain, who runs her business from her home, could use for short errands.

They also liked that the car would not be spewing exhaust.

The Mountains moved here from Southern California almost a year ago, and were concerned about raising their children in an area with poor air quality.

"It got us thinking, 'What could we do?'" Mountain said.

Jim Burke Ford referred them to an Orange County dealership that sold Ford Thinks.

"There was a sea of them," Mountain said.

There was also a three-month waiting list. In Southern California, the car has found popularity among universities and residents of small communities.

Mountain has not seen another Ford Think in Bakersfield, but she believes others would follow suit if the automaker stepped up marketing efforts.

She noted that most people, after asking what she's driving, want to know where she got it.

Her new car was towed to Bakersfield since it isn't meant for highway travel.

The Mountains paid just under \$10,000 for the Ford Think. It came with a 10 percent tax incentive and a three-year warranty.

When winter comes, Mountain hopes to have a heater installed. She also has soft enclosure doors that can be affixed to the car.

Mountain was disappointed when she recently learned that Ford is winding down production of the Think. Company officials have said they're going to focus on developing hybrid and hydrogen-fuel vehicles.

"We would love for the rest of Bakersfield to join in," Mountain said.

UC Davis study says spaces near WTC can be made habitable

Bakersfield Californian

NEW YORK (AP) - Apartments and offices near the World Trade Center site can be made safe for living and working if they are properly cleaned, according to a study released Tuesday by the American Lung Association of New York City.

The study was done in collaboration with Thomas Cahill, head of the Detection and Evaluation of Long-range Transport of Aerosols group at the University of California, Davis.

It found that there is little evidence of very fine particles from the collapse of the trade center persisting in indoor air space once the areas are cleaned according to Environmental Protection Agency guidelines.

"Our new analysis shows that in the sites we tested, those very fine particles either never penetrated the indoor spaces or were effectively removed by professional cleaning," Cahill said.

The lung association is urging residents near the trade center site who have not had their apartments professionally cleaned to schedule a cleaning.

Public and private tests detected asbestos, glass particles and other contaminants in apartments and offices after the collapse of the World Trade Center sent clouds of dust rolling through lower Manhattan.

The EPA announced in May that it would clean the apartments of area residents worried about lingering debris from the trade center site.

The air samples in the new study were collected at two offices and two apartments in May. They were analyzed for very fine particles of silicon, sulfur, vanadium, nickel and lead. Cahill found that the amounts of toxins at all four sites were well within public health guidelines.

The study did, however, confirm residents' fears of diesel pollution from the trade center cleanup effort.

At the three sites closest to ground zero, the levels of sulfur, which indicates the presence of diesel pollution, were much higher than at uptown sites.

"The air samples confirmed that diesel pollution from the countless vehicles involved in the recovery and rebuilding effort is heavily concentrated downtown," Cahill said.

Wildfire smoke pours into LA basin, boosting pollution levels

By **ANDREW BRIDGES** AP Science Writer

Bakersfield Californian

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Smoke roiling off a wildfire burning over thousands of acres in the Angeles National Forest filled much of the metropolitan region Tuesday, sending pollution levels soaring and triggering public health warnings.

Weather and geography conspired to extend the effects of the Williams Fire beyond the suburban foothill cities directly endangered by the flames on the south face of the San Gabriel Mountains, one of the ranges that hem the Los Angeles Basin.

An unusually strong inversion layer capped the smoke, confining it to a roughly 2,000-thick layer over portions of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, officials said. Lack of wind further kept smoke from dispersing, shrouding the region in gray.

"If I didn't know it was smoke, I'd think it was a low fog layer," said weather observer Lu Rarogiewicz as he overlooked the San Gabriel Valley from atop 5,700-foot high Mount Wilson.

The mountain was briefly enveloped in smoke earlier Tuesday, forcing astronomers there to suspend solar observations with the telescopes that dot the peak.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District, which monitors pollutant levels in the region, issued a special smoke advisory Tuesday, urging the public to avoid unnecessary outdoor activity in areas where the smoke was present.

The smoke contains high levels of fine particles that can lodge deep in the lungs, damaging them. The Los Angeles County Department of Health issued an "extreme caution advisory" for a wide area, chiefly valleys north and east of Los Angeles where smoke was trapped.

The smoke also contains pollutants that had settled out of the atmosphere in the last rain-free months, only to be pumped back into the air when the soot-coated brush burned, said Joe Cassmassi, a senior meteorologist with the air quality agency. That adds to the stew of pollutants contained in the smoke, he added.

"It's like a double-whammy in that regard," Cassmassi said.

An onshore flow was expected to pick up later in the week and help disperse the smoke.

State plugs in to wind, sun

New law rewards those who use alternative power

By Jake Henshaw, Visalia Times-Delta Sacramento Bureau

SACRAMENTO -- The future brightened Tuesday for consumers who want to cut their electricity bills by generating some of their own power, thanks to a bill that was signed into law.

Assembly Bill 58 expands the program and upgrades the rules allowing consumers to get credit for power they generate with solar or wind generation systems.

"It is a major step forward in the expansion of renewable sources of energy in California," said Assemblyman Fred Keeley, D-Boulder Creek, the bill's author.

"Importantly," Gov. Gray Davis said in a prepared statement, "it ensures that consumers are rewarded, instead of penalized, for using solar or wind power to augment their overall power usage."

In 1995, the state began requiring electric utilities to buy back any electricity generated by consumer-owned systems.

The program was dubbed "net metering" because the net electricity generated by the consumer was credited against electricity consumed, according to a legislative analysis.

Initially, net metering covered systems up to 10 kilowatts, which only was enough to include residences.

Last year, in the midst of the energy crisis, that was increased to 1 megawatt but only until January 2003.

"A silver lining of the energy crisis was it provided an opportunity to revisit this" issue of net metering, Keeley said.

AB58 makes the 1-megawatt cap permanent, which opens the door to some commercial and industrial customers.

The state's experience during the temporary 1-megawatt period suggested potential growth of the program, according to data provided by Keeley's office.

Prior to raising the cap to 1 megawatt, there were 747 residences in the state engaged in net metering for 2.5 megawatts.

Since the cap was raised, that number has jumped to 2,882 residences and businesses at 10 megawatts.

But that's still a fraction of the 54,000 megawatts that the state uses on high-demand days.

To help boost the program, AB58 also attempts to eliminate procedural hurdles that advocates say discouraged consumers from participating.

The bill will require uniform procedures and fees for applications and any required studies and equipment for interconnection to the grid. Participants also wouldn't face other fees not borne by other ratepayers.

The concerns of private utilities were addressed by making sure net metering customers didn't escape paying their share of the cost of power purchased last year by the state during the energy crisis or of public benefit programs such as those for low-income consumers, Keeley's staff said. The bill also addressed issues for net-metering programs by public utilities, which the state doesn't regulate.

"[Net-metering] customers provide system benefits to the state by reducing peak demand, and they reduce [their] own costs on peak," said Kari Smith, a representative of the solar-power industry.

Ralph Cavanagh of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, calls AB58 "a breakthrough."