

California's last nuclear power plant isn't going anywhere



STEVE OSMAN LOS ANGELES TIMES/TNS

California's last nuclear power plant, Diablo Canyon, was scheduled to shut down in 2025 until the state intervened to extend its operating life to 2030. Now there's speculation that it could remain open much longer.

BY THE TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

Officially, the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant has the state's permission to operate for five additional years — until 2030.

Unofficially, it could be even longer.

Instead of applying to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission for a five-year extension, Diablo Canyon's owner, PG&E, is asking for 20 years, even though it has the option of applying for a shorter term.

Given the NRC's record of rarely denying license extensions, it's highly likely that PG&E's request will be granted.

The company is downplaying the significance of its request by pointing out that 20-year extensions are the norm in the nuclear industry.

“The NRC’s standard processes for license renewal — including their safety and environmental reviews — contemplate a 20-year renewed license term,” PG&E spokesperson Suzanne Hosn wrote in an email.

At the same time, company officials acknowledge that a 20-year license would give the governor and the Legislature the “flexibility” to change their minds and extend the plant’s operating life past the 2030 deadline.

State officials aren’t rushing to contradict that — nor have they objected to the idea of a 20-year license for the twin-reactor plant located in San Luis Obispo County.

‘AT LEAST UNTIL 2030’

In a nearly unanimous vote last year, the state Legislature passed the [five-year extension bill](#) — SB 846 — upending a prior agreement to shut down the plant in 2025.

The decision came with the blessing of Gov. Gavin Newsom, who [supported a “limited-term extension”](#) of operations to “provide an on-ramp for more clean energy projects to come online.”

Whether the state can bring those projects online by 2030 is open to debate.

Maureen Zawalick, vice president of business and technical services at Diablo, is doubtful.

“Diablo Canyon is needed, not just until 2030, but at least until 2030,” she said at a March NRC conference. “We’re not seeing the progress that is needed on bringing offshore wind or other renewables online and energy storage and things like that.”

That single phrase — “at least” — is being picked up by the nuclear energy community, to the dismay of some opponents who fear the state may try to pull off a “bait and switch” by extending the plant’s life beyond five additional years.

State Sen. John Laird, whose district includes the power plant, says the Legislature’s position on the five-year term remains unchanged.

“As to whether the state is on track to meet its renewable energy and grid reliability objectives by 2030, at this juncture things are looking encouraging,” he said via email.

The California Energy Commission is not quite so optimistic.

In a [recent analysis](#), the commission concludes that, with power from Diablo Canyon, the state will have enough energy available to take us through the next 10 years, but electricity could fall short if we experience more “extreme heat events.”

Based on what we've seen in the past few years, the chances of more "extreme heat events" are high.

The report also questions whether wind, solar and battery projects can come online as scheduled, especially in the face of numerous hurdles.

"The pace of new, clean-energy resource development is impacted by three issues," the report says, "supply chain disruptions, interconnection delays (connecting new resources to the grid) and permitting delays."

It's a familiar refrain.

State energy experts have been making those same arguments for many months now, though they've been rebutted by those who want to see Diablo Canyon — California's last nuclear power plant — shut down.

5 YEARS VS. 20 YEARS

Proponents are all in on keeping the plant open as long as possible; they say it makes no sense to close a perfectly good plant prematurely when California is trying to wean itself off natural gas.

Opponents counter that the amount of spent nuclear fuel will increase the longer the plant stays open — yet the permanent storage site the federal government had promised hasn't materialized. They also warn of the continued risk of operating a nuclear power plant built near a network of earthquake faults.

Beyond those fundamental arguments, there are practical concerns — namely, what would it take to keep the plant operating past 2030 and how much would that cost?

So far, PG&E has been focused on the improvements "needed to maintain high plant reliability and nuclear safety through 2030," according to information PG&E presented to the [Diablo Canyon Independent Safety Committee](#).

Keeping it open beyond that date would require far more work.

"... Any possible extension of operations beyond five years would appreciably change the number of capital improvements projects that would be worthy of consideration," the safety committee wrote in a report, again summarizing information provided by PG&E.

So far, the state has not released cost calculations, though the California Energy Commission is working on an analysis comparing the cost of extending the life of Diablo Canyon to "a portfolio of other feasible resources."

If the costs prove prohibitive, “the commission shall reevaluate the cost-effectiveness of prolonging the power plant’s operations,” according to SB 846. That study is due out in September.

SHIFTING PUBLIC OPINION

Realistically, it seems almost certain that Diablo Canyon will be allowed to operate “at least” until 2030.

What’s more, public opinion supports that.

An [online poll conducted by UC Berkeley poll](#) last fall found that 56% of Californians favored keeping the plant open five more years, 19% were opposed and 25% were undecided. The pollsters also determined there was “less partisan rancor” over Diablo Canyon than in the past.

Still, there is some vocal opposition, along with legal efforts to force the plant to close in 2025.

For the most part, though, Central Coast residents have either grown to value the benefits of having Diablo Canyon as a neighbor — or resigned themselves to having a nuclear power plant in their backyard.

Even so, the uncertainty surrounding the plant’s future has been unsettling.

First it was five more years. Now the closure date is sounding “flexible.”

If that five-year period is indeed negotiable, the state of California should be upfront about it — sooner rather than later.

Whipsawing the community back and forth — again — would be unfair to San Luis Obispo County, which was already preparing to transition to a post-Diablo economy when the five-year reprieve was granted.

The community needs to plan for the future, especially since it’s looking ahead to offshore wind development, and there are questions as to whether there is the infrastructure for both nuclear and offshore wind power.

Besides, treating Diablo Canyon as a crutch — a backup to turn to at the last minute in case other projects are delayed — erodes confidence in the state’s ability to execute a plan to ramp up wind, solar and battery power in a timely manner.

Is it any wonder that consumers are scratching their heads, wondering how California is going to power all of those electric vehicles and appliances we’re encouraged — and in some cases mandated — to buy?

Under Gov. Newsom, the state has positioned itself as a leader in climate action, yet too often it offers excuses instead of accomplishments.

Californians deserve better, starting with an honest assessment of whether California's last nuclear power plant will shut down in 2030 — or will, as PG&E predicts, be needed beyond that date.