

Safety, high costs seen as basis for Trojan closure

RAINIER (AP) — Critics of Oregon's only commercial nuclear power plant believe Trojan has been permanently closed because it could not meet safety standards.

However, workers at Trojan say Portland General Electric, the plant's operator, just decided to stop shouldering the exorbitant costs of its protracted shutdown after a tiring fight against public initiatives to close it.

PGE was losing more than \$200,000 a day while the plant was off line for the past two months, awaiting government approval to start up again after a steam generator tube leaked minute amounts of radioactive gas.

Reactor operator Joseph Taylor was at the plant when workers were told Monday afternoon that it would never reopen.

"After the announcement, people still went about their jobs, making sure everything was done," said Taylor, who is also mayor of the town of 1,700.

"I was impressed with their attitude. These people are trying to bring home a paycheck for their families," he said.

Several workers defended the safety record of the plant, but said PGE was reluctant to pay for the lengthy shutdown while faced with the uncertainty of possible shutdowns in the future.

"I work at the plant; my family lives in Rainier, five miles from it. I believe it's safe," Taylor said.

"We think they've done a good job with respect to safety, but now we know it cost them a lot of money," said Adam Bless, who has inspected the plant for the Oregon Department of Energy for the past three-and-a-half years.

"You can't know when the plant might be down, it's too unpredictable," he said. "I think that's what got PGE, not just the cost but the uncertainty."

Bless said state law requires that no nuclear power plants be operated in Oregon except Trojan, likely making it the state's last nuclear plant.

Robert Pollard, nuclear safety engineer for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said PGE was misleading people when it said the decision to close the plant was based on economics.

Rather than admit nuclear plants can't operate safely, Pollard said, the utilities use the excuse that continued operation isn't cost-effective.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission goes along with the ruse, Pollard said.

"My feeling is that if the plants were required to operate safely, you would have many more plants closing. It's only because the Nuclear Regulatory Commission too frequently acts to protect the nuclear regulatory industry rather than the public, which exactly is why I left the agency," said Pollard, who once helped oversee the operation of Trojan.

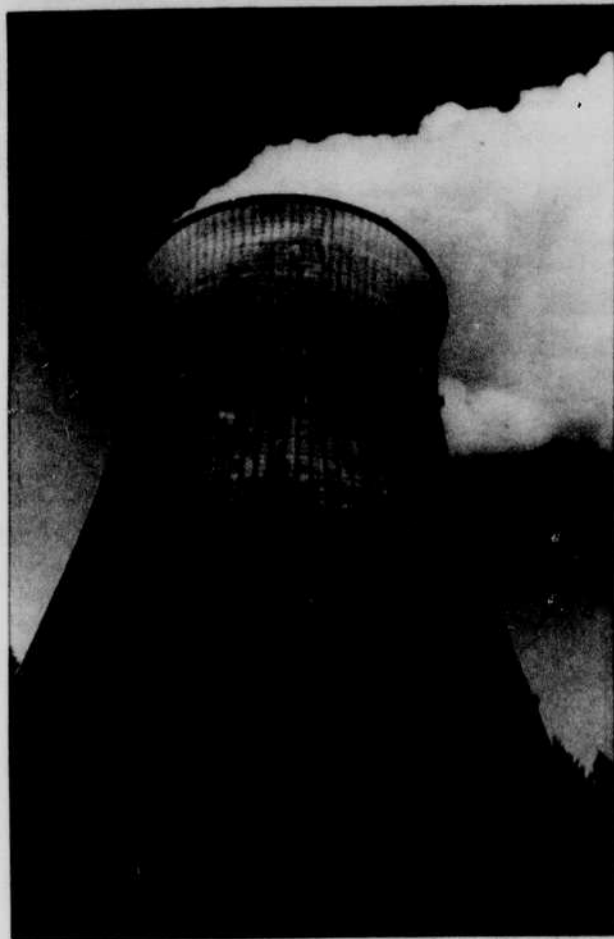


Photo by Michael Shindler

PGE decided Tuesday to close the Trojan nuclear power plant due to the high cost of continued operation of the controversial facility.

Pollard said the shutdown was forced by his organization's release of NRC documents that expressed concern for the plant's safety.

Angus Duncan, an Oregon member of the Northwest Power Planning Council, said the shutdown was good news.

"We finally have shut the door in Oregon on this ill-fated technology and done so in a way that protects the pocketbooks of PGE and the Bonneville Power Administration ratepayers," he said.

The state's other member on the council, Ted Hallock, also praised the decision.

"It recognizes that the economic and safety risks which accompany existing nuclear energy generation are too great to be a part of this or any other region's future," he said.

'We think they've done a good job with respect to safety, but now we know it cost them a lot of money.'

— Adam Bless,

Oregon Department of Energy inspector

In a successful bid to disarm two voter initiatives to close the plant, PGE announced in August that it would phase out Trojan by 1996. Then it spent millions of dollars to advertise the decision.

"Obviously if we'd had a crystal ball, we wouldn't have done that," said Ken L. Harrison, chairman of PGE's board.

On Monday, sponsors of one of the failed November ballot measures were already printing T-shirts with the slogan, "I told you so."

Greg Tozian, a spokesman for the group that put Measure 6 on the ballot, said PGE spent millions of dollars opposing the initiative because it would have protected ratepayers from absorbing the costs of closing the plant.

"We knew all along they were going to close it. They knew they were going to close it. The four-year phase-out was a smokescreen," he said.

Gov. Barbara Roberts was on vacation; however, her spokesman, Steve Cason, said she has consistently supported the plant's closure.

"She's always considered safety the highest priority," he said. "She is pleased that PGE has taken the best economic decision they could with that priority in mind."

Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore., applauded the decision.

"While PGE's decision was based primarily on economics, the shift from nuclear generation to natural gas, conservation, and renewable resources will help bring Oregon into better alignment with Clinton administration's energy policies," he said.

Mel Ferguson, chairman of the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council, said the council would turn its attention to making sure plans to decommission the plant are safe and to finding long-term power replacement.

Harrison has said that replacement will include the use of conservation and small gas-fired turbines as well as the continued purchase of power from outside the region.

Christine Ervin, director of the Oregon Department of Energy, said PGE's decision "creates much more incentive to step up the region's efforts in conservation and renewable resources."

TROJAN CHRONOLOGY

Here is a chronology of important events in the history of the Trojan nuclear plant:

1970 — Site excavation begins.

1971 — Atomic Energy Commission issues construction permit. Construction begins Feb. 15.

1975 — Plant completed in December.

1976 — Plant goes to full power in May.

1978 — U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission closes Trojan for nine-and-a-half months for repairs after discovering that the plant's control center does not conform to earthquake standards.

1984 — On Sept. 20, two safety-related water pumps and a diesel generator fail during a plant shutdown. An NRC engineer issues a report saying the malfunctions

could have led to a core meltdown under other circumstances.

1989 — NRC finds Trojan safety systems inoperable and fines Portland General Electric Co. \$280,000, the largest fine in the plant's history.

1990 — In November, Oregon voters reject Measure 4, which would have closed the plant in 30 days. Oregon En-

ergy Department threatens to shut down the plant if safety is not improved.

Aug. 10, 1992 — PGE officials vote to close Trojan by 1996, 15 years before its license would have expired. PGE says phasing out the plant in four years instead of shutting it down immediately would save ratepayers half a billion dollars.

Nov. 3, 1992 — Oregon

voters reject Ballot Measures 5 and 6, which would have closed Trojan or required much stricter safety and waste disposal standards.

Nov. 9, 1992 — Leaking radioactive steam forces shutdown of the plant.

Jan. 4, 1993 — PGE officials announce that Trojan will remain closed permanently.

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