

The Nuclear Power Plant on the Edge of Forever



By Andrew Christie, Chapter Director

On May 23, Governor Newsom's "[Energy Czar](#)" sent the U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm a [formal request](#) to change the rules for access to the \$6 billion fund created to prop up nuclear power plants in distress because the owners can no longer make a profit due to their inability to compete in competitive (deregulated) markets. The letter addressed the big hitch in the governor's giddy-up toward getting a slice of that bailout pie: The fact that California regulates energy, which means PG&E's profits, no matter what Diablo's expenses may be, are guaranteed by the Public Utilities Commission.

At the time of this writing, the Department of Energy has announced that it is preparing to change the rules of the Civil Nuclear Credit Program (CNC) to accommodate the governor.

If you haven't read "[Diablo's Long Goodbye](#)" in the June 2 *New Times*, feel free to do so, as I'm not going to repeat here all the reasons I cited there as to why the extension of the life of the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant is a bad idea.

In addition to those reasons, there's this one: Operating the plant past 2025 would require substantial repairs to aging infrastructure and compliance with power plant cooling regulations. Diablo's cooling system, like all systems dependent on sucking in seawater and spitting it out, will be illegal by the end of 2025 – a date long after the time when all other coastal power plants in California were required to comply with the law, an accommodation the state extended to Diablo Canyon because that's the date its operating permits expire. Bechtel estimated that replacing the plant's once-through cooling system with a closed cycle system would cost north of \$6 billion, and that was almost a decade ago. Ratepayers are already paying above-market rates for Diablo's energy.

These problems present one more problem: The federal CNC program requires that “the Comptroller General of the United States shall submit to Congress a report with respect to the credits allocated to certified nuclear reactors, which shall include... a quantification of the ratepayer savings achieved.” Since extending the life of Diablo would result in the opposite of ratepayer savings, this raises a question: Are you going to delete this requirement from the program too, Secretary Granholm?

At the June 22 meeting of the Diablo Canyon Independent Safety Committee, David Weisman of the Alliance for Nuclear Responsibility asked how the committee was going to evaluate the hurdles facing continued operations of the plant, given how much maintenance has been allowed to become “lax” due to pending retirement.

“My question took under three minutes,” Weisman recalls. “They responded with 16 minutes of detail on the voluminous challenges from operational and safety standpoints, all of which would need to be surmounted were an attempt at prolonging the operating life of the plant be attempted at this late date.”

[Here's what that looked like](#)

The video is public domain.
Download and share widely.



Calling the question David Weisman contemplating Diablo.