

California Energy Commission

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Capps Questions Nuclear Regulatory Chairwoman MacFarlane about Diablo Canyon Relicensing, Need for Additional Study



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WASHINGTON – This week, during a hearing of the Subcommittee on Energy and Power, Congresswoman Lois Capps (CA-24) questioned Nuclear Regulatory Committee (NRC) Chairwoman Allison MacFarlane about the importance of gathering and considering additional independent, peer-reviewed seismic data before moving forward with the relicensing process for Diablo Canyon. Capps also met with MacFarlane on Tuesday to discuss the relicensing process.

The licenses for Diablo Canyon's two reactors do not expire until 2024 and 2025. Relicensing of Diablo Canyon has been on hold since 2011, pending completion of independent, advanced seismic studies of the newly discovered Shoreline fault. Last November, the California Coastal Commission rejected PG&E's plan for conducting these studies due to concerns about their environmental impact. Capps has been working to ensure additional study of the fault is conducted, in a manner that protects marine life and the environment, and is properly considered before relicensing moves forward.

A transcript of the questions and answers is included below.

CAPPS: Thank you Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for your testimony.

Chairman Macfarlane, as we've discussed before, the Diablo Canyon Power Plant is located in my congressional district.

Diablo Canyon is the largest private employer in the area. PG&E, which operates the plant, does a lot of great work.

I've visited there several times myself over the years, and I want to thank you for taking the time to visit the plant earlier this year.

Now, we've known for a long time that this nuclear plant sits on the Hosgri fault, earthquake fault. But in 2008, the U.S. Geological Survey discovered a new fault called the Shoreline Fault.

The Energy Commission recommended – and our state PUC directed – that the utility conduct independent, peer-reviewed, advanced seismic studies prior to applying for relicensing.

As you know, PG&E asked to have their relicensing request paused, pending completion of these studies, and the NRC granted their request and I supported that action.

PG&E came up with a plan for the studies, but the Coastal Commission, California's Coastal Commission, rejected it last year due to environmental concerns.

I was similarly concerned about these impacts on marine life, which is why I supported making it a limited pilot program.

But the health and safety of my constituents is my top priority, and I strongly believe that additional study of the fault is needed before the relicensing process can move forward.

While I understand this effort has been driven by the state, I would hope the NRC would also want to have the best, most up-to-date information about this fault.

Chairman Macfarlane, do you also agree that having additional, independent data on the Shoreline fault would be helpful? I'd appreciate just a yes or no.

CHAIRMAN MCFARLANE: Additional information can always be helpful, but we can operate with the information that we have.

CAPPS: So you would agree that more information is a good thing?

CHAIRMAN MCFARLANE: I agree, in general, that more information is a good thing.

CAPPS: Last October, the NRC published a Research Information Letter claiming that Diablo Canyon is seismically safe.

Yet there are other scientific studies that seem to conflict with the NRC's report and I'm holding up one.

USGS seismologist, Dr. Jeanne Harderbeck, who discovered the Shoreline fault, just published an article in the peer-reviewed Bulletin of the Seismology Society of America, and this is a quote, "much is unknown about the Shoreline fault."

This raises concerns for me and my constituents that there are still unanswered questions about the seismic situation.

So Chairman Macfarlane, how can we ensure that these questions and concerns are properly addressed?

CHAIRMAN MCFARLANE: Fortunately right now there's an ongoing process. There's a committee called the Senior Seismic Hazard Assessment Committee actively evaluating the seismic situation at Diablo Canyon and there in the middle of the process. We're observing this process and are looking to see what the outcome is.

CAPPS: The fact remains that another federal scientist – in a peer-reviewed study – says more information is needed. So we clearly need to figure this out.

I think we can all agree that every angle must be thoroughly examined.

The NRC analysis needs to incorporate independent, concrete data that can be tested against those of seismic experts, like Dr. Harderbeck.

I think it makes sense to have the best eyes and minds in our country working together, looking at these seismic issues.

Because actually this is first and foremost about safety.

The NRC has a responsibility to make sure Diablo Canyon is as safe as it can be today, but also into the future.

I want the record to note: Diablo Canyon and the NRC have more than a decade to make these decisions because these licenses expire until a decade from now so there's no rush.

We must work together to find a responsible way to gather and consider the additional data before relicensing moves forward.

Chairman Macfarlane, I hope you share this commitment, and I look forward to working with the NRC to ensure this process is done right.