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Power plant's closure is urged

South Bay facility's permit up for review

By **Mike Lee**
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Elected officials, environmentalists and residents are making a concerted push today to pull the plug on the South Bay Power Plant, which state energy officials want to keep but opponents criticize as harmful to the environment and a hindrance to bayfront development.

The Chula Vista plant's pollution permit is set to expire in November. Advocates of a plant demolition are asking the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board to overrule its staff's decision to keep the current permit in place for up to five years.

They cite the board's own documents showing the plant's once-through cooling system, which sucks in water from the ocean, can harm or kill more than 1.6 billion fish and larvae each year. They also accuse the 49-year-old facility's managers of renegeing on promises to cease operations.

"People feel manipulated and misled, and they are getting tired of it," said Laura Hunter, Clean Bay Campaign director for the nonprofit Environmental Health Coalition in National City. "This is a clunker, and it needs to be retired."

But leaders of California's power grid — the Independent System Operator — are poised to extend "must run" status to the facility by Friday. That means energy officials still consider it critical to ensuring a reliable supply of electricity in the region, even though a nearby power plant is about to start full production.

The Otay Mesa Energy Center in South County — a natural-gas, air-cooled power plant owned by Calpine Corp. of Houston — is expected to ramp up operations this fall.

The regional board, which is charged with protecting water quality in the San Diego area, will take up the power plant issue at its monthly meeting today.

Hunter will submit dozens of signed petitions to the board. The agency also has received letters from Rep. Bob Filner, D-Chula Vista, the Chula Vista City Council, county Supervisor Greg Cox and others who seek to end the pollution permit. Some of them have urged regulators for years to have the plant torn down in hopes of sparking bayfront redevelopment, including a stadium for the San Diego Chargers.



The pollution permit for the South Bay Power Plant, which hugs the waterfront in Chula Vista, is nearing expiration. *John Gibbins / Union-Tribune - San Diego Union-Tribune*



Aerial view of the South Bay Power Plant.

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"The residents of Chula Vista have shouldered the negative environmental and economic impacts of this regional facility for almost five decades," the city's council members said in an August letter.

These elected officials said they didn't object to the current pollution permit, issued in 2004, based on the understanding that the plant would be taken out of service by February 2010.

At full speed, the facility sucks in hundreds of millions of gallons of bay water daily to cool units that can generate more than 700 megawatts.

Duke Energy, which ran the plant until 2007, indicated five years ago that it planned a shutdown after the present permit expired in November.

Then Houston-based Dynegy Inc. took over the facility, and it asked the regional water board in April to issue another permit for five years. The company's officials said they only plan to run the plant until it is no longer considered a "must run" facility by the California Independent System Operator, or ISO.

"Our focus is not on operating the plant indefinitely," said Dynegy spokesman David Byford. "Our focus is operating the plant in a safe, reliable and environmentally responsible manner only as long as the ISO requires us to do so."

John Robertus, executive officer of the regional board, said he's extending the South Bay facility's permit so state water-pollution officials have enough time to complete new rules governing power-plant cooling systems. The State Water Resources Control Board could adopt that policy by year's end, but the highly contentious issue may be headed to court.

Grant Destache, a member of the regional water board from Chula Vista, yesterday said he wants to hear from Robertus and his fellow board members before taking a position.

"I think there are alternatives to (the South Bay Power Plant), and we will have to see how the issue shakes out," Destache said. "The regional board has to take some stand on what the future of the plant should be."

The South Bay site is one of 19 facilities statewide that use once-through cooling. Such systems are widely viewed as environmental liabilities. In addition to killing fish and larvae, they expel heated water that alters ocean temperatures and thus can damage marine ecosystems.

"The days are numbered (for) those who continue to use once-through cooling," Robertus said.

Nonetheless, he said several factors underpinned his decision to let the plant continue operating. These include the state's ongoing deliberations about once-through cooling, the huge burden that writing a new permit puts on his already overstretched staff and the significance of the South Bay plant's role as an energy supplier during periods of peak demand.

At the Environmental Health Coalition, Hunter said the facility's "must run" status doesn't give Dynegy the right to avoid environmental reviews. Hunter also is concerned that California is still years away from phasing out once-through cooling.

"We don't think that the potential of a policy at some point in the future is a good reason for inaction on the part of the water board," Hunter said.

Theresa Acerro, president of the Southwest Chula Vista Civic Association, urged the regional board to hold public hearings regarding the extended permit in the South Bay and not just at the agency's offices in Kearny Mesa.

"It is not the job of the (regional board) to decide how much electrical generation is needed," Acerro said. "We'd like them to focus on water quality. If they did that, they would not want to reissue this permit, and that would leave the power plant the option of upgrading to air cooling or deciding it's better to tear the whole thing down and go away."

Union-Tribune

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SOUTH BAY POWER PLANT

- Started in 1960.
- Operated by Houston-based Dynegy Inc. since 2007.
- Produces more than 700 megawatts at peak, enough to power about 700,000 homes.
- Harms marine life with its cooling system.
- Designated a "must run" facility by the California Independent System Operator.

DETAILS

Who: San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board meeting

What: Discussion of a pollution permit for the South Bay Power Plant

When: 9 a.m. today

Where: 9174 Sky Park Court, San Diego

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