

Nuclear Cooling Tower Debate Continues

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TRENTON, N.J. (AP) - A proposal to require the owners of a New Jersey nuclear power plant to install water cooling towers that would help revive the waterway at the site has been put on hold.

The Senate Environment Committee delayed a decision on the bill after hearing more than three hours of testimony Monday. It will be considered again in February.

Sen. Bob Smith, the committee chairman, said heated water from the Oyster Creek power plant and chemical runoff are threatening the bay. The power plant circulates bay water through its cooling system before returning it to the bay at a warmer temperature. Fish-kills and algae blooms occur in heated waters.

Exelon Corp., which owns the power plant on Barnegat Bay, said the towers would cost hundreds of millions to build, making the plant uneconomical. Cost estimates on the towers ranged from a low of \$50 million to a high of \$800 million.

Plant employees and municipal officials said they are worried about the plant's future.

"In this economy, it would be irresponsible to move ahead with programs and restrictions which would cut jobs and diminish New Jersey's business competitiveness," Smith said, calling for more time to consider the future of the bay. "However, I believe we can work with all parties to maintain jobs and improve environmental controls at Oyster Creek."

Environmental groups want to see cooling towers built, saying they would reduce the need for cooling water from the bay and prevent destruction of marine life. The towers would cut the impact from returning heated water to the bay by about three-fourths, according to environmental group estimates.

The bay generates an estimated \$3 to \$4 billion in fishing and recreational tourism per year.

Oyster Creek is the country's oldest operating nuclear power plant. The Lacey Township facility was granted a new 20-year operating license by federal regulators this year.

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