Locals Want Oldest U.S. Nuclear Plant to Stay Open

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LACEY TOWNSHIP, N.J. (AP) — It's the oldest nuclear power plant in America, and it recently leaked radioactive water into the ground that threatened drinking water in its southern New Jersey neighborhood.

But people living near the Oyster Creek Nuclear Generating Station packed a public hearing on its future Thursday, dismissing environmental concerns as "pseudoscience" and focusing on the jobs and tax revenues the plant provides.

The hearing was called to discuss a key element of the deal reached last December to shut the plant down in 2019, a decade earlier than called for under its federal license. A water quality permit the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection proposes to give the plant's operators, Chicago-based Exelon Corp., would let the plant operate until Dec. 31, 2019, without having to build costly cooling towers. The towers would prevent the deaths of millions of fish and tiny marine organisms each year, and reduce the temperature of water flowing back out into the endangered Barnegat Bay.

One environmental group said that water is as super-heated as the average backyard hot tub.

"The nuclear plant has been an excellent neighbor here," said Neil Marine, a Lacey resident who said he has seen no evidence of radiation or chemical contamination leaving the plant.

"We hear a lot of pseudoscience here," he said. "We have the best fishing on the East Coast in my lifetime right here — with the nuclear plant. A little bit of warm water is not killing our bay.

"I swim in that outflow," he said. "I eat the fish. I eat the crabs. I live the life."

He and others said the real problem with Barnegat Bay is nitrogen from lawn fertilizer runoff, not the plant's warmer waters.

The plant is located about 60 miles east of Philadelphia and 75 miles south of New York City. It produces 636 megawatts of electricity per hour, enough to power 600,000 homes, and provides about 9 percent of New Jersey's electricity.

Bob Dunlap, a member of the Fish Hawks, a local anglers group, also called Oyster Creek a good neighbor that cares for the environment.

"We fish and clam in that bay," he said. "I ask everybody to stand behind them and

let them do their jobs."

Peter Lachawiec, mayor of neighboring Waretown, called on Exelon to scrap its agreement with the state to shut down in 2019 and negotiate a new plan to extend the life of the plant, or build a new one near its existing site, provided cooling towers are part of the plan.

"I'm a proponent of nuclear energy," he said. "I want a new nuclear plant. I also want cooling towers. I think they should be here for the next 50 years. Build a new nuclear plant, build the cooling towers, you can make all the money you want, and we still all have our jobs."

Mike Sowa of Lacey says he looks out his kitchen window each evening to watch the sun set over the plant.

"I love it," he said. "I fish and clam in the bay. I eat all that stuff and it didn't hurt me. Exelon has been a great neighbor. I wish they would stay here a heck of a lot longer. I caught two keeper fluke in the bay today; the fishing is still very nice."

Last year, the administration of outgoing Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine told Oyster Creek it needed to build one or more cooling towers in order to qualify for a water permit. But in December 2010, the administration of Republican Gov. Chris Christie reached a deal with Exelon to drop its insistence on cooling towers in return for the plant shutting down 10 years earlier than planned. Exelon said building the cooling towers, whose cost estimates have ranged from $200 million to $800 million, would be unprofitable.

Environmentalists have long called for the plant to be shut down, arguing its effects on marine life and the overall water quality of the shallow Barnegat Bay cannot be tolerated. Jeff Tittel, executive director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, said the plant sucks in more than 165 millions of gallons of water a day, an amount equal to 2.8 percent of the entire bay.

He said the water discharged back into the creek averages 97 degrees, "which is about the temperature of my hot tub."

Tittel also said the permit at issue contains a loophole that Exelon could exploit to keep the plant open past 2019 if it changes its mind about shutting it down. He said the permit does not specify that water taken into the plant after Jan. 1, 2020, can only be used for decommissioning purposes instead of operating it as a normal.

He said Exelon would still have a valid license from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission allowing it to operate until 2029, and could challenge in court the agreement it signed with the state to shut down.

Suzanne D'Ambrosio, a spokeswoman for Oyster Cre8ek, said Tittel is needlessly worrying because Exelon won't break its word.

"It's not going to happen," she said. "We have made a commitment to shut down

Oyster Creek in 2019 and that's what we will do. We made a commitment to the state of New Jersey and we will stand by that commitment."

Heather Saffert, a scientist with Clean Ocean Action, said the plant's intake system kills fish and endangered sea turtles by sucking them through or up against metal grates. She said the plant has trapped 60 sea turtles against its grates since 1993, killing 20.

Bill Wolfe, director of New Jersey Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, said the plant "is slaughtering aquatic life in the bay."

Oyster Creek went online Dec. 1, 1969, the same day as the Nine Mile Point Nuclear Generating Station near Oswego, N.Y. But Oyster Creek's original license was granted first, making it the oldest of the nation's 104 commercial nuclear reactors that are still operating.

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