Environmentalists contest Ameren nuclear renewal

ALAN SCHER ZAGIER - Associated Press - Associated Press

A Missouri environmental group is asking the federal government to more closely scrutinize Ameren Corp.'s request for a 20-year license renewal at the state's only nuclear power plant.

The Missouri Coalition for the Environment on Tuesday filed a legal objection to the utility's plan with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The coalition wants the federal agency to hold a formal public hearing on Ameren's license renewal application, a move that would likely delay consideration of the request. Ameren's current 40-year operating license for the Callaway County plant expires in 2024.

The application and protest are not related to Ameren's recently announced plans to team up with Westinghouse Electric Co.to build five smaller, "modular" nuclear reactors. The companies are seeking more than $450 million in federal support for that project.

"Our longstanding concern, in regards to the Callaway nuclear reactor, has been one of public safety and the protection of our environment," said Ed Smith, the environmental group's safe energy director. The group held a Wednesday press briefing on its NRC filing.

Diane Curran, a Washington, D.C. attorney for the coalition, said the license renewal requires further scrutiny after a March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that crippled Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant. The tsunami sent three of the plant's reactors into meltdown in the world's worst nuclear crisis since Chernobyl in 1986.

The nuclear agency has given Ameren and other U.S. nuclear reactor operators a deadline of February 2013 to submit updated seismic studies and complete another safety plan sought in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese disaster, with a December 2016 deadline to put those improvements in place.

Agency officials said at a March public hearing in Fulton that they expected to make a decision on Ameren's relicensing request by the end of 2013, though that timeframe didn't account for a public hearing. Curran said the license renewal shouldn't happen until Ameren provides the government those requested plans. The St. Louis-based utility submitted its license renewal application for the nuclear plant late last year.

"The decision on a license renewal should be delayed until all of this information is in," she said.

Ameren spokeswoman Rita Holmes-Bobo said Wednesday the company welcomes

public comments about its plans and "is confident that the NRC will evaluate all public input thoroughly." The utility's Missouri manager for nuclear development previously said the Callaway relicensing request isn't necessarily contingent on enhanced safety rules post-Fukushima.

The environmental group's legal filing also criticizes Ameren for what it says is the company's "inadequate discussion" of wind energy as an alternative to continued use of nuclear power in its required environmental reviews for the renewal request.

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