Speakers rail against Dominion Va. Power plans

STEVE SZKOTAK - Associated Press - Associated Press

Dominion Virginia Power's long-range energy plans were criticized Tuesday for relying too heavily on fossil fuels at the expense of renewables such as wind and solar and energy efficiency.

Activists, grandparents, physicians and solar power producers were among the two dozen speakers at a hearing before the State Corporation Commission on the utility's integrated resource plan. The 15-year roadmap outlines how Virginia's largest utility intends to supply energy to its 2 million customers.

The company has said it expects electricity demand to increase by nearly 30 percent by 2026. It has proposed closing some coal-fired plants, which was praised by some speakers, while converting or adding more gas-fired power stations. It also lists a third reactor at its North Anna Power Station as a possibility, the conversion of three coal stations to biomass and energy conservation programs.

Still, speakers said, Dominion is investing too much in "dirty" energy and not enough in clean energy and efficiency.

"By adding solar and wind, we're going to be adding jobs. I think they need a nudge," Delegate Joseph Morrissey told commissioners, urging them to reject the plan.

Morrissey also delivered a letter from 13 fellow state legislators who echoed his sentiments. They cited a study that estimated an offshore wind industry in Virginia could create up to 10,000 jobs.

Commissioners heard from a suburban Richmond mother who said coal-fired plants had aggravated her son's asthma, from a northern Virginia physician who listed a litany of health risks related to burning fossil fuels and from activists pushing renewable energy.

"Wind and solar work. These are not experimental technologies anymore," said Scott Price, director of the Alliance for Progressive Values in Richmond. "We need to push more in the right direction."

Dominion, in a response provided to The Associated Press before the hearing, stressed that the plan is not cast in stone and is updated every two years to reflect changes in assumptions, load growth, market developments and other factors.

"Dominion Virginia Power and its sister companies have a broad array of renewable facilities in operation, under construction or in development with the potential to power more than 400,000 homes," the company said.

It cited, for example, the proposed addition of 30 megawatts of solar power on leased commercial rooftops. Dominion is also among the energy companies bidding for leases to develop wind generation off the coast.

Renewable energy, the company said, "is part of a balanced approach and a diverse energy mix, which is necessary to protect the environment, keep rates low and reliability high, and support economic growth across the commonwealth."

Dominion also said renewables come with a price: higher rates for taxpayers. The cost of offshore wind, for instance, is estimated at 24 cents per kilowatt hour in 2016 compared to 7 cents today for all generation in Dominion's current portfolio.

As the hearing wound down, about 50 anti-coal, clean energy activists toted solar panels, wore breathing masks and held up makeshift windmills outside the SCC's offices. They were skeptical of Dominion's commitment to energy efficiency and renewable sources of energy.

Dawone Robinson of Chesapeake Climate Action Network said Dominion could shift some of its profits to cushion ratepayers from the costs of investing in offshore winds.

"We want to see a commitment from the largest utility in the state of Virginia to a multi-purpose approach that also includes offshore winds," he said. "I think they can afford the investment in a cleaner energy future."

Glen Besa, director of the Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club, said he believes Dominion is overstating future demand. He said efficiency and more wind and solar could bridge the gap in the future.

As for offshore winds, he said, "If they're serious about that, why isn't that in their plan."

The SCC isn't expected to rule on the plan for several months.

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