San Diego Utility Revives Plans for Electric Plant

ELLIOT SPAGAT, Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — A Southern California electric utility said Tuesday that it was reviving plans to build a large, natural gas-fired plant after news that the San Onofre nuclear power plant was closing.

San Diego Gas & Electric Co. said it will ask regulators next week to approve a 300-megawatt plant in unincorporated Otay Mesa near the Mexican border. The California Public Utilities Commission rejected it in March, delivering a victory to environmental and consumer groups who deemed it unnecessary.

The renewed effort came four days after Southern California Edison announced that it was closing San Onofre after a 16-month shutdown. SDG&E, which has 1.4 million customers in San Diego and southern Orange County, has historically gotten about 20 percent of its electricity from Southern California's largest power plant.

"Essentially you have a different set of circumstances," said Michael Niggli, SDG&E's president and chief operating officer.

Public Utilities Commissioner Catherine J.K. Sandoval said that the earlier rejection of the Pio Pico plant didn't take into account San Onofre's closing, but she avoided comment on merits of SDG&E's renewed bid. She appeared with SDG&E officials at a news conference to reaffirm that San Diego, like the rest of Southern California, is expected to have enough power for peak demand this summer.

San Onofre was a key piece of California's electric grid for the 2,200 megawatts of power it could produce and for its strategic location near the border of San Diego Orange counties. The plant shut down when excessive wear was found in hundreds of steam generator tubes.

The California Independent System Operator, which operates the state grid, predicted last month that summer consumption would increase 2.3 percent from last year but that additional generation would allow utilities to meet demand — even without San Onofre. SDG&E officials pleaded with consumers Tuesday to conserve energy this summer, a message that Southern California Edison will preach at a news conference Wednesday in Orange County.

SDG&E critics said the new plant would be unnecessary even after San Onofre closes and highlighted new generation and transmission capacity. The unit of Sempra Energy completed a 117-mile transmission line from California's Imperial Valley last year that can bring up to 1,200 megawatts to San Diego.

"It's a disingenuous effort because the facts aren't there," said Nicole Capretz, associate director of the Environmental Health Coalition in San Diego. "We have a saturation of gas plants and other resources."

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