Regulators OK Solar Expansion for Georgia Power

RAY HENRY, Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia Power must purchase more solar power for its energy system under a plan approved Thursday by state utility regulators, a move sought by solar developers and renewable energy proponents but denounced by a commissioner who argued it could raise costs.

Public Service Commissioner Lauren "Bubba" McDonald's plan calls for the Southern Co. subsidiary to add 525 megawatts of solar energy to its electrical grid, a plan backed by a group of solar developers and organizers of the Atlanta Tea Party Patriots. McDonald called for expanding the renewable energy source as a hedge against environmental rules that might force coal plants offline or future increases in the price of natural gas.

The full Public Service Commission approved the proposal 4-1.

"We don't know what tomorrow is going to be with coal. We don't know what tomorrow is going to be with natural gas," McDonald said after the vote. "But we know the sun will be shining."

Solar power will remain a tiny fraction of Georgia Power's overall energy generation even once the new solar projects approved Thursday and those underway are making electricity. Georgia Power did not propose adding new solar projects in its original plan to meet the state's energy needs for the next 20 years. But when it became clear that supporters had the votes, the company's lawyer said the firm did not object.

Commissioner Stan Wise, who voted against the plan, accused Georgia Power executives of caving because he said the company has other issues before regulators that are of more concern to the firm. Those include an upcoming regulatory decision on the company's rates and a review of cost overruns on two nuclear reactors now under construction at Plant Vogtle (VOH'-gohl), southeast of Augusta.

"The ramification will be higher rates, which the company knows but won't say because they have more important issues in front of this commission," Wise said.

The proposal was backed by Georgia Solar Utilities, formed by a group of developers earlier spurned by Georgia Power when they proposed building a large-scale solar energy project. Company President Robert Green had earlier asked the commission to force the utility to add more solar energy to its long-term plans.

"We're in a perfect position right now with the additional generation to start here

now," Green said. "And today was a good start."

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