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Nuclear dilemma perils Northwest power supply

PORTLAND, OR. — (UPI) Concern about how the Pacific Northwest electric utilities are going to meet needs of their customers in the decade of the 80s has been voiced by state and federal authorities in recent weeks.

However, they use different terms.

Bonneville power administrator Sterling Munro says he deprecates the lengthy delays in building nuclear power plants and has called for removing restrictions on all forms of energy resource development.

Oregon Public Utility Commissioner John Lobdell has urged Portland General Electric Co., and by implication other utilities, to consider non-nuclear ways of producing more power.

PGE president Robert Short says his company hasn't made a decision on whether to go ahead with that long-planned \$4 billion Pebble Springs project.

Five years ago, Pacific Northwest utilities were in the process of

building or had on the drawing boards plans for 18 coal-fired and nuclear power plants. Completion schedules on those projects called for those plants to begin generating electricity at intervals from September 1975 to July 1985.

Four of the nuclear plants, at least, aren't going to meet the timetable, likely won't yield any power at all before 1989 or 1990, and may never be built. Because of delays in winning permit approvals, they have progressed no farther than the drawing boards.

Work has just begun on building two coal-fired plants, held back by similar problems, that were scheduled to start generating power at Colstrip, Mont., last year.

Five more of the nuclear plants—being built by the Washington Public Power Supply System—are still in various stages of construction, each at least three years behind schedule. In part their tardiness is due to work stoppages, in part to "backfitting" ordered by regulatory agencies with afterthoughts and in part because of plain, ordinary, unanticipated delays that plague most major building projects.

PGE and Pacific Power & Light

Co. are partners with Puget Sound Power & Light Co. in all four of the unstarted nuclear plants and both of the lagging coal plants. In addition, PP&L has a 10% share of two of the five still a-building nuclear plants in Washington, and PGE, a similar interest in one.

Lobdell had suggested in early January that because of substantial delays in building nuclear power plants, PGE "should immediately reassess its position" to be in better shape to meet future customer needs for electricity.

Lobdell's warning, accompanying his permission for PGE to raise household customers' electric rates 19.1%, came only a couple of weeks after PGE squeaked through a serious power supply problem.

With the Trojan nuclear plant in Oregon shut down by government edict, and with northwest hydro dam reservoirs drying up because the customary fall rains failed to arrive, PGE spent the last month of 1979 imploring customers to cut back on power use, while buying and borrowing electricity to the limit when it was available from other utilities.

Munro fears that PGE's experience may be only a preview of what's in store for the region's other utilities if progress isn't speeded on building more power plants.

"The situation is grave," the BPA administrator told the Washington State Legislature recently. "In any year in the 1980s in which stream flows are at or near critical levels, there likely will be power curtailments."

Unless streamflows are at least of average volume in the 1983-84 year, Munro projects a potential power shortage of 2.8 million kilowatts—equal to the needs of three cities the size of Seattle. BPA estimates a 40% probability of a power shortage ranging to that magnitude.

Energy-saving measures by consumers can help reduce the size of the shortage, Munro said, and so

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can energy gained from the wind, the sun and other renewable resources, but only to the extent of about one-third the projected power deficit.

LOOKING FARTHER ahead, Munro says that if the four nuclear generating plants planned by PGE, PP&L and Puget Power aren't built until 1989 or 1991 (or perhaps not at all), "I don't know how to predict accurately the size of the 'power' shortages in the latter half of this decade."

Lobdell said he, too, is concerned that PGE won't have new power plants operating when growth in electricity use exceeds the supply available from existing generators. But he also said that as long as PGE "keeps its eggs in the nuclear basket," the likelihood is that the N-reactors won't go into operation on schedule.

"The company should plan for construction of generating resources that can be brought into service in a timely and cost-effective manner," Lobdell had said in his PGE rate boost order. "It does not appear that nuclear generating facilities meet those tests in today's environment."

He adds opposition to nuclear plants in Oregon may be "formidable" because of unanswered safety questions arising from the Three Mile Island reactor mishap. Initiative petitions are circulating in Oregon to ban nuclear power plants, and bar Oregon-based utilities from financing nuclear reactors in other states.