

WPPSS: What Price Power?

Bad news comes in gigantic doses when the board and managers of the Washington Public Power Supply System estimate what it's going to cost to finish the five nuclear plants the system has under construction.

Nearly lost in all the public attention paid to the eruption of Mount St. Helens was last week's eruption of the system's latest guess on how much the plants will cost — \$15.6 billion.

That represents a 366 percent increase in costs from the time nearly a decade ago when WPPSS thought it could build the five plants for \$4.1 billion.

Just last year WPPSS managers estimated the final cost would be \$11.8 billion, which seemed astronomic at the time. Based on that figure, WPPSS and a legislative study predicted the cost impact of the five plants would quadruple electric bills for many of the state's public utility customers.

If the new \$15.6 billion figure has validity, and if it holds as the final cost, then the cost impact would multiply electric bills not four but five times over what they are now.

Granting WPPSS' success so far in estimating what the plants will cost, there is good reason to suspect that \$15.6 billion will not be the final cost figure. And there is much to be feared in that.

The \$15.6 billion estimate represents a 25.5 percent increase over last year's guess of \$11.8 billion. That's a tremendous rate of increase. If it holds, and if construction delays continue, it's theoretically possible within three years the cost for the five plants could be upwards of \$30 billion.

By now it is no news that the WPPSS executive board and the State

Legislature are worried to the extreme about what the final costs of the plants will be. The board has fired WPPSS' manager, Neil Strand, and plans to pick a new chief executive by the end of this month, with hopes to bring cost increases under control. The Legislature is undertaking an investigation of what is going on. That investigation, however, has gotten off to a bad start. Led by Sen. Ted Bottiger of Tacoma, a Senate Energy Committee subcommittee snuck into the Tri-Cities the other day under assumed names and began interviewing in secret people who work for WPPSS. The excuse was that many of these workers would not talk to the committee without secrecy.

The committee has got to work in the open on a matter of so much importance to the welfare of the state and region. No report it can issue will be worth doing unless the testimony it is based on is public, made under oath.

Changing regulatory requirements, labor problems, inflation and plain incompetence are all involved in the giant cost hikes. Diagnosing what cost-increasing factors can be changed is important now, if only to hobble that rampant rate of cost increase.

Otherwise the future for the plants would begin to look grim. The public can swallow only so much in higher electric rates. If and when tolerance ends, WPPSS will have to look at stopping simultaneous construction of five plants and at finishing them one at a time. At worst it would have to look at killing one or more of the projects. Either choice would lead to power shortages soon, with grave economic and social effects yet but dimly glimpsed.