

Energy: Sometimes you have to wrestle down the 800-pound fossil fuel gorilla one finger at a time

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The San Onofre nuclear power plant, via the [Creative Commons](#).

Can lost nuclear power capacity be replaced by renewable energy?

By Bob Berwyn

FRISCO — This week’s decision by a PUC judge in California may help jolt the slow shift toward renewable energy into a higher gear, according to environmental advocates who have been watchdogging the process of replacing the power once produced by the now-defunct an Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

At issue was an application by San Diego Gas & Electric to contract with Carlsbad Energy Center, LLC for the purchase of energy from a proposed new gas-powered plant. When San Onofre closed, SDG&E was directed to replace the shuttered plant with at least 200 megawatts from clean energy resources and between 300-600 MW from “any resource,” which could include gas or clean energy.

State policy requires feasible and cost-effective clean energy resources be considered before resorting to gas, which SDG&E ignored in a process that did not provide a level playing field for cost effective, clean energy resources to compete.

The judge rejected the deal because it ignored earlier mandates to consider

renewable energy source during the contracting process. If the California Public Utilities Commission follows through with the rejection, it would mean that at least part of the power capacity of the former San Onofre plant would be replaced with renewable energy, according to Earthjustice attorney Tamara Zakim.

“The proposed decision is about common sense and smart energy planning,” Zakim said, adding that the coalition of watchdog conservation groups was surprised by the judge’s proposed decision. Based on previous business-as-usual decisions resulting from the grinding PUC administrative process, there was only about a 1 percent chance at this outcome.

“California needs to consider and utilize its plentiful renewable energy options before it builds dirty new power plants that contribute to climate change,” Zakim said. “The closure of the San Onofre Nuclear Generation Station in southern California gives the state an important opportunity to do things right by addressing climate change and filling its energy needs with clean power.”

The proposed 600 megawatt plant was opposed by the Sierra Club, Earthjustice and the California Environmental Justice Alliance as it was moving through the approval process before clean energy alternatives were considered.

The proposed decision by the judge pointed out that “... SDG&E’s RFO (request for offers) has produced a robust number of offers for preferred resources and energy storage which could potentially meet some, if not all, of the 300 MW to 600 MW of SDG&E’s ... need.”

For more background, please see [this Sierra Club blog](#).

“From the beginning, we knew that 100 percent of San Onofre could be replaced with clean energy, said environmental attorney Matt Vespa. “The decision recognizes that clean energy is a viable option and must be allowed to compete against dirty fossil fuels,” Vespa said. “Looking ahead, we still need Commissioner Picker and the CPUC to uphold the decision. This is an opportunity for the Commission to regain public trust during a time when they have shown favoritism to utilities.”

Other environmental advocates said the proposed decision represents progress for citizens who want clean air and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. “It’s too bad the Commission didn’t have that same foresight when it approved the dirty and expensive Pio Pico power plant in Otay Mesa, a low-income community of color that’s already overburdened with air pollution and the resulting health problems,” said environmental policy advocate Kayla Race.

When SONGS retired, SDG&E was directed to replace the shuttered plant with at least 200 megawatts (MW) from clean energy resources and between 300-600 MW from “any resource,” which could include gas or clean energy.

With regard to 300-600 MW of energy need, the decision required SDG&E to issue an all-source request for offers (RFO) – a procurement process that accepts and evaluates bids from all energy types – to meet some or all of this need. SDG&E was also directed to follow state policy that requires feasible and cost-effective clean energy resources be considered before resorting to gas. By requesting approval for the Carlsbad plant, SDG&E made a mockery of the requirements and did not provide a level playing field for cost effective, clean energy resources to compete.