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State officials grant use of water for nuclear plant in Green River

By Amy Joi O'Donoghue , Deseret News

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SALT LAKE CITY — Critics of a proposed nuclear power plant near Emery County's Green River say the state dodged its only real chance to say no to the deal and instead waffled by granting water rights necessary for its operation.

"It is devastating news," said Matt Pacenza, HEAL Utah's policy director, reacting to Utah State Engineer Kent Jones' Friday decision to grant water rights for the Blue Castle project. "This was the only opportunity for a Utah official to weigh in on the wisdom of building nuclear reactors on the Green River, and unfortunately he made the wrong decision."

Under state law, applications for water rights must be approved if it can be demonstrated to the state engineer that a number of factors have been met, including if the water is available from the source, existing rights won't be impaired and if the project is financially feasible. Those requirements were met, Jones said, and criticism was weighed during an evaluation process that took more than two years.

The water — 53,600 acre-feet per year — is owned by Kane County and San Juan County water conservancy districts, which have proposed leasing the water to Blue Castle Holdings for use at the two-unit nuclear power plant.

Both districts have contended they won't need the water for decades to come and such a business arrangement promises to deliver a financial windfall to the rural, sparsely populated counties.

The requests, however, have raised multiple concerns such as the safety and oversight of nuclear power, local water use interference, wildlife concerns including endangered fishes, over-appropriation of Colorado River water and the economic viability of the project.

"We have listened to and very much appreciate the concerns raised by those in the local community and others," Jones said. "Those concerns helped us look carefully and critically at the proposal as we considered the appropriate action on these applications."

Pacenza's HEAL Utah, an anti-nuclear activist group, has been among the many organizations voicing strong opposition to the power plant and criticizing the use of river water as unsustainable.

"Pretending there is enough water in the Green River for the power plant is a mistake," says Bob Quist, the owner of Moki Mac River Expeditions, which leads rafting trips on the Green River. "It's bad for my business and bad for everyone that depends on this river."

Pacenza adds that granting the water for a nuclear power plant represents another flawed policy position Utah officials have taken when it comes to energy development.

"It is another example of Utah officials embracing the dirty, dangerous energy of the 20th century, rather than the clean energy of the 21st."

In a release announcing his decision, Jones said the water for the nuclear power plant does not represent a lot of Green River water, but it does constitute a "significant" portion of water Utah has yet to develop off the Colorado River system.

The granting of the change applications does not guarantee sufficient water supplies into the future, and the design of the plant will have to address the possibility of interruptions in that supply, Jones said.

Although Emery County officials have signed off on the proposal, some residents in the area and adjacent tourism hot spots in Grand County have been vehemently opposed to siting a nuclear power plant on their doorstep.

"This is going to make it harder for farmers to get the water they need out of the river," says Tim Vetere, owner of Vetere Farms in Green River, which raises melons, sweet corn, field corn, hay and more. "Also, I'm worried that if a nuclear power plant goes in, people won't want to buy my melons."

Ultimately, it is the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission that will license the plant — a process expected to take several years. The decision on the change applications authorizes use of the water after NRC approvals are obtained.

Prior to any construction, NRC will oversee an exhaustive design process to make certain the proposed site is safe for a nuclear power plant and the National Environmental Protection Act and Endangered Species Act requirements are complied with. Blue Castle's president and chief executive officer is Aaron Tilton, a former Utah legislator, who is raising the capital to finance construction of a plant that would generate 3,000 megawatts of electricity. Tilton didn't return phone calls Friday.

The plant would be built on 1,700-acre parcel four miles west of the town of Green River and be capable of increasing the amount of electricity generated in Utah by 50 percent. Blue Castle expects to have its preliminary site application submitted to the NRC sometime in 2013 and hopes to have the site ready for construction by 2016.

Interested parties may view a copy of the decisions from the Utah Division of Water Rights website: www.waterrights.utah.gov.