

Environment & Energy

California Pushes Ahead Governor's Fossil Fuel Electricity Plan

By Zach Bright

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- Measure would turn to fossil fuels for electricity
 - Electricity needs will surge, air agency says
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California could draw on fossil fuels and weaken environmental reviews to meet surging electricity needs if an energy bill that cleared the Legislature gets signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom.

The measure, AB 205 / SB 122, would use gas power plants and diesel backup generators to prevent power failures, which environmental advocates warned could undercut the state's emissions goal as it rapidly electrifies. The legislation, advanced Wednesday, lacks fossil fuel limits, putting it at odds with plans unveiled this month by the California Air Resources Board to reduce use of fossil fuels by 91% and reach carbon neutrality by 2045.

"It's all based on a large failure to plan, so it's focused more on doubling down back onto dirty fossil fuels instead of investing into clean renewable energy," said Mike Young, political and organizing director for California Environmental Voters.

The proposal, which came from Newsom's (D) administration as a trailer bill for the state's newly passed budget, will head to his desk and awaits his signature.

The energy bill would authorize the state Department of Water Resources to accelerate the set up of electric power projects, an ability of the Energy Commission—which the bill would also expand. It would give the water agency \$700 million and allow it to act in exemption of the California Environmental Quality Act, Coastal Commission approval, and local environmental laws for those projects.

Other agencies including the Coastal Commission, Department of Toxic Substances Control, and regional water boards regained oversight formerly under the Energy Commission's purview.

Concerns, Ramifications

The bill includes another energy-boosting provision to allow companies to fast-track the construction of wind and solar farms, lithium-ion batteries, and connections to the grid without local approval. State officials would only have nine months to carry out environmental reviews and approve or deny projects, and any lawsuits would have to be resolved in another nine months.

Provisions such as the emphasis on clean resources and utility bill debt-relief were “extremely important” planks in the bill, the Natural Resources Defense Council wrote in a letter. It also warned of the bill’s provisions that allowed for fossil fuel use, among other issues.

Despite the bill’s aim to keep power flowing during heat waves and other emergencies, aging gas-powered plants broke down in last year’s hot summer. Advocates like Young say there should be a bigger burden of proof to justify the viability of fossil fuel plants as backups.

Funding in the bill could play a part in keeping the Diablo Canyon power plant, the only operational plant and largest single power station in California, contributing to the more than 9% of power California sources from nuclear generation.

Newsom has expressed support for keeping the plant operational, and Pacific Gas and Electric—Diablo’s owner—is considering applying for federal funds to keep it running.

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