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State to Decide on Feasibility of Reactors

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RICHMOND -- State environmental officials are scheduled to decide next Thursday whether Dominion Virginia Power's plans for new nuclear reactors at its North Anna plant are consistent with coastal-zone protection laws.

A decision was expected recently, but the Department of Environmental Quality needed more time to study the proposal. The department must sign off on large construction projects that require state and federal permits.

Although Louisa County is technically not part of Virginia's coastal zone, certification is required because Spotsylvania County borders Lake Anna across from North Anna Nuclear Power Station.

Dominion contends that any effect on Virginia coastal resources would be small and would be mitigated through state-mandated measures to control erosion and sediment.

Friends of Lake Anna, which represents about 2,600 lake area residents, contends that the DEQ has not fully addressed questions it and other groups have raised about Dominion's plans and the state's certification process.

Harry Ruth, a founder of the group, says the department has ignored requests for information and failed to address key questions. For instance: how new reactors would affect lake water levels, temperatures and recreational use.

"We're not anti-nuke. We do not have a not-in-my-backyard attitude," Ruth said. "We are concerned about the health, safety and welfare of the current users of this lake and future generations and are troubled by the state's handling of this review."

Bill Hayden, spokesman for the agency in Richmond, said the agency has not decided what its response will be. "We're still reviewing it," he said.

Richard Zuercher, spokesman for Dominion, said of the company, "We think we've made a pretty good case that the [application] meets coastal-zone management certification requirements."

Lake Anna was formed in the early 1970s to cool reactors at the plant. Since that time, thousands of homes have been built around the 13,000-acre impoundment in Fredericksburg's back yard.

Dominion is one of four utilities across the country testing a new permitting process with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission that could lead to building the first commercial nuclear reactors in more than 30 years.

The Virginia company has applied for an early site permit, which is the first step. That approval would allow Dominion to resolve environmental, safety and site issues before applying for permission to build and operate one or more new reactors.

Under the current timetable, the NRC is expected to decide on the reactor permit late next year.

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