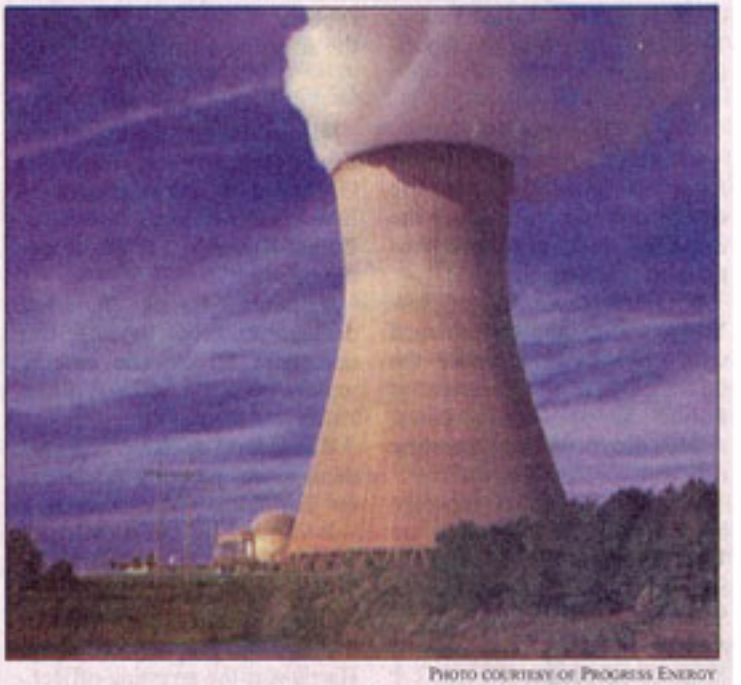
New Hill targeted for additional reactors



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The cooling tower at Shearon Harris Nuclear Plant in New Hill is a familiar site to most local residents.

Shearon Harris site chosen for possible expansion

By Shawn Daley
Editor

Progress Energy officials thoroughly reviewed 13 different locations throughout the Carolinas before selecting a site for possibly two new nuclear reactors.

In the end, the answer was right in their own backyard.

The Raleigh utility announced Monday that it will seek a federal license for additional reactors at the Shearon Harris plant in New Hill.

The announcement is the first step in a very lengthy process that could take at least nine years to complete.

It will take two years for Progress Energy to complete a license application and environmental impact study along with a series of town meetings.

Following that process, the utility will make a definitive choice to either pursue permission to build new reactors or a coal-powered plant.

If approved by both the N.C. Utilities Commission and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, construction could begin by 2010 and take about five years to complete.

"This is the just the beginning of a long process," said Progress Energy spokesman Keith Poston. "We haven't even made a decision yet on whether or not we will build (a new reactor).

"If economic conditions change or growth forecasts change it could delay (or terminate) the project."

It's those economic and growth factors that have Progress Energy considering new power plants in the first place.

Since the Shearon Harris plant was constructed in the mid-1980s, Progress Energy has grown by about 500,000 customers and an additional 300,000 customers are expected within the next decade.

"A renewed emphasis on conservation and energy efficiency is an important factor in planning for the future," said Progress Energy CEO Bob McGehee in a written statement. "However, even with more conservation and energy-efficiency programs, energy use will continue to grow as more people move to this region.

"To meet that growing demand for electricity we'll

need to add significant new power generation."

But some critics are quick to point out that Progress Energy hasn't been very reliable with their forecasts in the past.

Jim Warren, executive director of the N.C. Waste Awareness and Reduction Network, notes that Shearon Harris was originally designed for four reactors but only one was ever built.

"Should we trust their forecasting?" asked Warren. "In the 1970s they told us we needed four reactors and that certainly wasn't the case.

"The economics don't add up either. They admit it would cost about $3 billion to build a new reactor but these projects are very complex and never come in under budget. It would probably end up costing about $6 billion or $7 billion. Who will end up

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paying the bill?"

Warren, a longtime critic of the Shearon Harris plant, is also concerned about safety issues. He noted that the NRC is currently investigating the plant for alleged security problems.

"Their safety and security record at that plant is abysmal," said Warren. "They have long withstanding problems that remain uncorrected."

The solution to the energy problem, said Warren, is not nuclear power.

"We should be working on energy efficiency and renewable energy," said Warren. "We don't need to gamble billions of dollars in public money when we could just take the smart energy approach.

"Progress Energy could be several years into the project and if conditions change they would have to stop it. If an accident or terrorist attack happened at a plant anywhere in the world it could lead to the collapse of the industry. That's not energy security."

Poston said that Progress Energy has an excellent safety record and outstanding security measures.

He also noted that nuclear power is currently the best option available to meet the nation's growing energy demands.

"Oil and gas plants are cost prohibitive and coal-powered plants have problems with carbon emissions and numerous environmental restrictions," said Poston. "It's important to explore renewable energy but wind and solar power are just not available to meet large scale demand right now.

"The nuclear industry has strict regulations for safety and security. That's why there has never been an emergency in the U.S., including Three Mile Island, that has harmed the public's health. Not everyone agrees with nuclear energy but it is a very reliable and environmental-friendly source of energy."