

# Why I changed my mind about California's Diablo Canyon nuclear plant - Sacramento Bee

---

Jun 15 2022

*Originally published in the Sacramento Bee*

By Dianne Feinstein

California is a global model in the fight against climate change, but the balance necessary to achieve carbon neutrality is delicate and the obstacles many. Longer, hotter summers mean more electricity use, while worsening droughts limit hydropower. With the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant scheduled to close, state regulators project years of electricity shortfalls.

As these challenges converge, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. should reconsider its decision to close Diablo Canyon by 2025. The utility should get the plant relicensed instead, retiring it once the state can replace its production with clean sources.

When PG&E announced the planned closure in 2016, I supported the decision. I remain concerned about the lack of long-term storage for spent nuclear fuel and am working to develop better solutions.

But at this point, keeping Diablo Canyon open and producing carbon-free energy is more important.

California has some of the most ambitious clean-energy goals in the world, including decreasing carbon emissions to 40% below 1990 levels by 2030 and achieving 100% clean electricity by 2045. That will require energy alternatives that can provide power around the clock in addition to solar and wind. Shutting down the state's single largest power producer under these circumstances would make little sense.

Closing Diablo Canyon would remove 18,000 gigawatt-hours from the grid, nearly 10% of the state's electricity generation. This is an extraordinary amount of power for a grid facing reliability concerns amid heat waves and wildfires. When the power goes out, lives are endangered.

Moreover, the plant generates 15% of the state's carbon-free electricity. At least in the short term, that would have to be replaced with fossil fuel generation.

I continue to advocate for renewable energy. It is clearly the future for not only California but also the country and the world. But while California is leading the way on renewables, we aren't there yet.

The recent bipartisan infrastructure bill invested heavily in wind, solar and other forms of clean energy, an acknowledgment that renewable energy is the future. But the law also provided funds to help defray the costs of extending the life of Diablo Canyon and ensuring it's safe.

A report last year by Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that if PG&E extends operations at Diablo Canyon until 2035, California could reduce power sector carbon emissions by over 10% below 2017 levels, saving \$2.6 billion and significantly reducing natural gas use.

The report also highlighted the reliability issues the state could face without Diablo. State and grid officials recently issued similar warnings about reliability, warning that peak summer demand may cause significant blackouts.

In August 2020, extreme heat led to rolling blackouts and electricity shortages in California. If Diablo had not been running, the shortage could have been three times worse.

In November, two former U.S. energy secretaries, Steven Chu and Ernest Moniz, urged Californians to rethink decommissioning Diablo. Unless the plant is kept open, they noted, California will need to rely more on fossil fuels at a time when we need all the carbon-free power we can get.

Last month, the Energy Information Agency noted the repercussions of drought for hydropower, underscoring the need for diverse means of generation, including solar and nuclear. Drought could force California to significantly increase natural gas generation and power purchases from neighboring states.

If California is to lead the clean energy transition, as state law mandates, Diablo must keep operating, at least for the time being.

California is facing an immediate climate change crisis. We're already confronting rising temperatures, devastating droughts, deadly wildfires and destructive sea-level rise. The window for meaningful action to slow those effects is closing, and we must consider every measure to counter the coming onslaught. That includes extending the life of Diablo Canyon.

*Dianne Feinstein is California's senior U.S. senator.*