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Editorial: Utah's water too valuable to squander on nuke plant

Nuclear plant is wrong for Utah

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It takes a lot of water to keep nuclear reactors cool and safe at a nuclear power plant like the one proposed for Emery County on the Green River. Whether the river will be able to provide a constant flow is just one issue that 7th District Judge George Harmond will decide in a lawsuit brought by environmental groups to stop construction of the plant.

In fact, water — its availability and its value to competing public interests — are the questions. The growing scarcity of water for the 35 million people who depend on the Colorado River system must rise above concerns for more power or the bottom line of any company.

State Water Engineer Kent Jones last year assigned rights to 53,000 acre-feet to Blue Castle Holdings, the Utah company headed by former state Rep. Aaron Tilton, for use at the proposed \$13 billion, 3,000-megawatt plant. It would sit at the intersection of U.S. Highway 6 and Interstate 70 near the city of Green River.

A coalition of conservation groups and people with interests in river rafting and fishing oppose the plant. They argue the proposal is based on highly optimistic expectations of continued Green River flow and the river's ability to fill Flaming Gorge Reservoir. The reservoir, important to keep flow to the plant constant, is threatened by drought.

Given the record drought and high temperatures in Utah and throughout the West the past two years, that argument is gaining credibility. While the plant would take about 1 percent of normal flow, in dry years the percentage would jump to about 6 percent. That water is not returned to the stream. And more dry years are likely. Engineers for Blue Castle said two years ago that it's "inconceivable" that the Green River would be too low to provide cooling water. "There would never be a safety issue due to a lack of water." But climate change is making "dry" the new normal.

Also at issue before the court is whether the project will impair senior water rights. The water rights awarded to Blue Castle come from Kane and San Juan counties and, under Utah's "first in time, first in right" water law, they could supersede rights of the Central Utah Project, which supplies water to 600,000 people on the Wasatch Front. In any case, using water for nuclear power would preclude its use for homes, businesses, recreation and agriculture. Fish and other wildlife can die in the water intake structures.

Hugely expensive nuclear power plants have lost popularity for a number of reasons, including safety and the unsolved problem of what to do with nuclear waste. There hasn't been a new plant completed since the mid-'70s. Renewable energy instead should be the focus.



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