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Canadian nuclear commission recommends Lepreau extension

Hearing to take place Jan. 19 to decide if NB Power will continue to operate facility for another year

Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission staff members have recommended a one-year extension to NB Power's licence to operate Point Lepreau. [Enlarge Photo](#) [Click to Enlarge](#) [Click to Enlarge](#) [Canadaeast News Service](#) An aerial photo of Point Lepreau nuclear facility, which has seen great delays on its refurbishment.

A hearing has been set in Ottawa for Jan. 19 at which time the tribunal will decide whether to grant the extension to the nuclear reactor's existing five-year operating licence. The current licence is set to expire June 30.

During this month's hearing, NB Power will also provide the commission with an update on the refurbishment of the reactor, which is more than two years behind schedule. Additionally, commission staff members will present the findings of their annual safety assessment for the generating station.

NB Power is requesting the one-year extension of its existing operating licence in order to continue focusing on refurbishment activities that are scheduled to continue beyond the current licence end-date. The move would extend the same terms and conditions as specified in the current licence.

The commission has been advised that NB Power expects to ask for a fuel-reload hearing in late 2011.

But the commission's decision to hold a one-day hearing in Ottawa has sparked an outcry from a coalition of groups who wanted the hearings held in New Brunswick.

Commission spokesman Aurèle Gervais said the commission is of the view that since the hearing is to renew the current licence for a period of only one year under the same terms and conditions to allow for the completion of the refurbishment project, there is no need to have a comprehensive hearing with oral presentations in New Brunswick.

"Because the Point Lepreau Nuclear Generating Station is currently in a de-fueled state and experiencing delays in its refurbishment activities, the commission is conducting a simplified one-day hearing," he said.

Gervais says the commission has committed to holding part of its next Lepreau hearing in New Brunswick. That's when the commission will decide whether to grant a five-year permit for the plant's start-up and operation. The coalition of groups opposed to the continued operation of the Point Lepreau nuclear plant says it's disappointed a federal watchdog won't hold hearings in New Brunswick for the licence extension.

Willie Nolan, a member of the Point Lepreau Decommissioning Caucus, expressed concern that the hearing wasn't held in the province.

"Having it in Ottawa in the middle of January instead of New Brunswick, it's a bit much to ask us," said Nolan, a Harcourt resident who is a member of the International Institute of Concern for Public Health, which is calling for the nuclear reactor's decommissioning.

Among other things, her group is now calling on former Liberal MLA Alan Graham, a member of the commission, to support their call for the hearing to be held in New Brunswick instead of Ottawa.

She's also concerned that members of the public were allowed to make written submissions, but won't have the chance to make oral presentations.

"We have some concerns and we want them heard," said the Kent county woman.

"The CNSC is a public body meant to protect the health and safety of the public. So the people should be heard," Nolan said.

Nolan said members have concerns about the cost and the safety of the plant and believe the reactor is a white elephant that should be shut down.

Gervais said the upcoming licence renewal is administrative in nature since the unit is in a shutdown state - the safest state of any reactor.

"The upcoming hearing is not about reopening the debate about refurbishment; that issue was discussed at the public hearing for the Point Lepreau licence renewal in 2006," he said.

NB Power asked for the one-year extension noting that it would allow them to better focus on the completion of the refurbishment project, which has faced ongoing technical issues, particularly with the resolution of the calandria tube rolled joint leak tightness.

Among other things, Nolan said she is concerned that staff members have called for the renewal ahead of the hearing.

Gervais said the conclusion of commission staff amounts to a recommendation.

"Members of the tribunal are independent and are not bound by staff's recommendation," he said.

Commission staff members have been reviewing the operations at the station and have recommended that the board provide the one-year extension.

"It is CNSC staff's conclusion that a one-year renewal of the existing (Power Reactor Operating Licence), with the same format and content, would contain all of the necessary CNSC regulatory requirements required for the safe operation of (Point Lepreau Nuclear Generating Station), including refurbishment activities. In essence, only the licence period would change. CNSC staff recommends that the Commission... renew the current (operating licence) for a period of 1 year, from July 1, 2011 until June 30, 2012," reads a section of a Nov. 22, 2010 report on the application written by commission staff.

Gervais said written presentations that were sent to the hearing ahead of the December deadline will carry the same weight as oral presentations.

"Comments, whether presented orally or in writing, are given equal consideration," he said.

NB Power will hold its own public session Thursday night at the Dipper Harbour Fire Hall from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. NB Power also plans to issue a refurbishment report Thursday.

Kathleen Duguay, NB Power's spokeswoman on the Lepreau project said 380 calandria tubes are currently being polished to make them leak-proof.

"We're in the process of polishing, we removed them all and now we're polishing them to put them back in," said Duguay.

She said the one-year extension is different from the process of renewing the plant's licence, which it will do next year.

"We're not asking to renew because we're in the middle of the refurbishment, so we're asking to extend. But we still have to demonstrate to the commission and its board that we have all the measures in place to continue to be able to operate the plant for another year."