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California Energy Commission okays power plant restart over City objections following unexplained explosion

HAYWARD, Calif., July 19, 2021—The California Energy Commission approved on Thursday an application by Calpine Corp. to resume operation of its Russell City Energy Center power plant following an unexplained explosion and over the objections of the City of Hayward.

The City opposed the application saying the plant shouldn't be allowed to be restarted until the cause of a May 27 explosion and fire at the facility is known and not until full assessments and public review of the safety risks and potential environmental and public health impacts have been completed.

With the vote to approve the application, Energy Commission staff members and commissioners acknowledged a need for greater oversight of plant operations and promised more openness and cooperation with the City and its Fire Department to ensure the facility is run safely.

"We are encouraged about the acknowledgements and prospects for improved oversight, transparency and partnership," said Hayward Mayor Barbara Halliday. "At the same time, our objections to restarting the plant are unchanged, and we are very disappointed with the decision."

The explosion took place shortly before midnight on May 27 in an energy-generating steam turbine and scattered flying chunks of hot metal hundreds of feet—including a 15-pound piece that cut through the roof of an unoccupied recreation room 1200 feet away at the City's Housing Navigation Center for people experiencing homelessness. Another piece, weighing over 50 pounds, landed on the City's wastewater treatment plant located adjacent to RCEC.

The explosion ignited a fire of burning lubrication oil. The flames forced the evacuation of nearby residents due to the presence of highly explosive hydrogen gas on the site. Meanwhile, workers at an adjacent City wastewater treatment facility indoors were forced to seek refuge inside due to the heavy smoke.

Despite the extensive debris field from the explosion, no one was killed and no injuries were reported, though the health effects on Hayward firefighters who responded to the scene are still being assessed.

Parallel investigations to determine the cause of the explosion and contributing factors are under way by plant-owner Calpine and the California Energy Commission (CEC). In approving of the restart before investigation results are known, CEC commissioners and staff members said they are confident the plant could be run safely at reduced capacity and that the facility is needed to maintain the reliability of the state's electrical power grid.

In the days leading up to the hearing, it was learned the plant failed a March 2019 safety investigative audit by the California Public Utilities Commission, which among other things found leaking lubrication oil on the steam turbine that would explode two years and two months later. It is unknown what corrective action was promised and carried out since Calpine's written response to the audit was submitted to the CPUC under seal and has remained confidential ever since. CEC staff also had been unaware of the audit.

Additionally, the safety audit specifically directed Calpine to reach out to the Hayward Fire Department to conduct joint emergency drills. But Calpine never did so and the joint emergency drills called for in the audit never took place.

The Russell City Energy Center, which began operations in August 2013, was commissioned by the CEC as a combined-cycle power plant comprised of two gas turbines and a steam turbine. It generates electricity from natural gas and generally is relied upon in during periods of peak demand when temperatures are highest.

The steam turbine that experienced the catastrophic failure receives heat from high-temperature exhaust gases generated by the gas-powered turbine. The sequestered heat drives the steam turbine to generate additional electricity.

Under the application to restart the plant, Calpine would run the facility at about half its capacity using just the gas turbines. By doing so, the plant will release twice the amount of carbon emissions per unit of energy produced—but overall levels would not exceed state public health and environmental thresholds, according to an CEC analysis of the application.

To learn more about the power plant and for updates, go online [here](#) to the Russell City Energy Center page on the City of Hayward website.