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Pio Pico power plant opponents gather in San Ysidro

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Natural-gas plant proposal killed in March could be resurrected

By [Dave Rice](#), Dec. 18, 2013

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Dozens of protesters from across the county gathered outside San Ysidro Middle School on Tuesday afternoon, December 17, to rally before heading into a meeting arranged by the Environmental Protection Agency. The purpose of the meeting was to gather comments on changes to a "prevention of significant deterioration" (PSD) permit that would revive plans to build the Pio Pico Energy Center. The proposed natural-gas-fired "peaker" power plant [was shot down by the California Public Utilities Commission](#) in March, before it was announced that the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station would be permanently shuttered.



Fake checks made out to "San Diego GREED & Electric," signed by "unhappy customers"

"We cannot afford Pio Pico's 30 million tons of carbon emissions," said Nicole Peill-Moetler, an activist with the environmental group [SanDiego350.org](#), which, along with the Environmental Health Coalition and the local Sierra Club chapter, organized the protest (the EPA report on the project [actually calls for up to 40 tons of CO2 emissions per year](#)). "Pio Pico will irreversibly lock us into expensive, dirty energy for San Diegans for decades," said Peill-Moetler.

The original plan for the power plant had called for a 20-year service life, altered to 25 years in the new proposal.

Activists are calling for an expanded renewable-energy program across the county instead of additional plants powered by fossil fuels. Erica Johnson, who appeared representing a local solar firm, said the cost of the plant was equivalent to roughly 70,000 consumer-scale solar systems.

EPA facilitators at the beginning of the meeting specified the limited scope of the gathering of public comments; they would include only those directly pertinent to "revised particulate matter and best available control technology."

EPA staff stated that the general community-comment period had closed following another meeting in 2012, after which the EPA eventually granted a permit for the plant — even though the state energy regulator blocked its construction. Regardless, many of the dozens of individuals providing testimony chose to go off-topic and make generalized statements about climate change, community impact, and pleas for the agency to deny the project on other grounds.

"The proposed revised permit conditions do not impose any limit on the number of hours Pio Pico would operate," observed Kelly Fuller, representing the Protect Our Communities Foundation, a group that originally sprung up in opposition to San Diego Gas & Electric's Sunrise Powerlink project. While the plant is intended to be used only during peak demand times, [EPA documents](#) would allow the plant to be turned on and off as many as 500 times in a year, granting a 41-minute period during each cycle when emissions would be allowed to exceed the base calculations by a factor of five or more.

"The larger picture is that Pio Pico is not needed to keep the lights on," said Fuller. "We can get all the power that we need through other means such as renewable energy and energy efficiency."

Jack Shu of the Cleveland National Forest Foundation presented a chart showing that [projected emissions in San Diego are already expected to spike, despite a state order for reductions](#), arguing that the current plan "is not working. Emissions are going up when they should be going down." A new gas power plant, Shu said, will only exacerbate the problem.

Joy Williams and Kayla Race, both representing the Environmental Health Coalition, delivered rapid-fire commentary crafted to meet the razor-sharp line of targeted discussion as defined by the EPA, calling for additional monitoring of pollution levels. Williams stated that testing at Donovan State Prison, located a few miles from the proposed Pio Pico site, has already indicated levels 50 percent higher than permissible under existing guidelines.

"The 'acceptable' level should be the lowest level possible," said Williams, speaking of registered air pollution, "not a level higher than that of any other recently constructed 'peaker.'"

The EPA is set to review all commentary and issue a thorough written response in the coming months, though final approval of any new plant still hinges on approval by the California Public Utilities Commission.

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