



KILAUEA RIFT: The Geothermal Power Struggle

Cable plan far behind schedule

By Jim Borg
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The first public document detailing plans for a controversial 500-megawatt geothermal development on the Big Island is at least seven months behind schedule, meaning it won't be finished until after the November elections, state energy officials say.

Gov. John Waihee says the timing is coincidental.

"The master plan is not being held up for political reasons," said Waihee spokeswoman Carolyn Tanaka. "It's just behind schedule."

The draft master plan for the 500-megawatt geothermal cable project, originally to have been completed this month, now is expected in December.

Waihee, who is running for a second term, has been urged by some environmental groups, native Hawaiian organizations and his health director, Dr. John Lewin, to reconsider his advocacy of large-scale geothermal development.

Waihee insists he hasn't made up his mind one way or the other. But he says to cancel the project now before the answers are in would be senseless.

"There is a need for alternate energy development in this state," he said. "Geothermal energy is the best alternative that we have to do that."

In a meeting with editors at The Advertiser last week, Waihee said geothermal energy for the Big Island is a forgone conclusion. But he said a decision on the 500-megawatt project and the multimillion-dollar undersea cable that would link it to Oahu depends on information still to be gathered.

"While we want to have certain kinds of development, it's not at any cost," said Waihee. "We want to find out how it works economically and environmentally. We shouldn't say yes or no based on something as nebulous as an idea."

Waihee said the "easy" political solution would be to simply abandon geothermal plans.

"It would be so simple to just drop it if I was to play politics with it," he said.

The final master plan and environmental impact statement are now due in early 1992. The contractor is ERC Environmental and Energy Co., with a regional headquarters in San Diego and a staff of 12 here.

Foes seek alternative: conservation

The Public Utilities Commission in January directed all utilities to pursue what is called integrated resource planning, which includes a review of conservation or "demand-side management."

Among many environmental groups, that approach is the preferred alternative to geothermal energy.

"You can find just as many megawatts in an energy conservation program," says Annie Szvetcz of the San Francisco-based Rainforest Action Network, echoing the sentiments of the Hawaii chapters of the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

State energy officials admit plenty remains to be done with solar water heating and in improving the efficiency of appliances, buildings and industry. But they say those measures should be done in addition to, not instead of, developing geothermal energy.

In the process of turning crude oil into transportation fuels, Hawaii's two refineries now produce about 9 million barrels of so-called "residual" oil per year for the electric utilities. Another 3 million barrels of residual oil is imported to meet current demand, which is forecast to grow by 3 percent a year through the 1990s.

Says Alan Lloyd, HECO executive staff engineer: "The non-petroleum sources such as geothermal and/or coal are expected to pick up the new electrical loads of our growing economy."

Generating 500 megawatts of electricity now requires burning 7 million barrels of oil each year.

-Jim Borg