

Editorial: Green River nuclear plant is looking like a tough sell

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Environmentalists this week dropped their legal battle to kill a nuclear power plant in southeastern Utah. They didn't change their minds about the plant. They just think it will die without their help, and it's hard to disagree.

It was always a long shot when Blue Castle Holdings announced with some fanfare years ago that it had a plan for a fission plant near the Green River in Emery County. The plant would need a lot of water from the river for cooling, so Blue Castle negotiated to buy water rights from downstream users in San Juan and Kane counties. Environmental and anti-nuclear groups sued over that water transfer, claiming among other things that the river is already overallocated, which it is. (The river is also shrinking as the climate changes, which means there will be even less to allocate.)

The environmentalists didn't so much drop their legal battle as they lost it. The Utah Court of Appeals last month upheld a 2013 lower court decision that said the transfer was legit and didn't interfere with existing water claims. They could have appealed to the Utah Supreme Court, but they didn't.

The environmentalists say Blue Castle lacks the funding to proceed anyway. They say the company only has about \$20 million in backing when it needs more like \$50 million or \$100 million to formally apply for a permit from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. They also think they won't be able to keep paying on the water leases they're not using.

For its part, Blue Castle says outside groups don't know what funding they have, and they say they've met their lease payments so far. And the favorable court decision gives them something to take to potential investors. "The ruling is a major derisking milestone for the Blue Castle Project," a company statement said. The company also recently announced it has started a contractor-selection process.

Nuclear power could use some "derisking," but it will take more than a court ruling. Fission reactors are capable of delivering greenhouse-gas-free power in great gobs, but they come with health and safety risks and the legacy of radioactive waste. Add in the falling costs of solar electricity production, and nuclear often finds itself on the outside of the clean-energy revolution. The people who sell power around here, including Rocky Mountain Power, are not seeking this plant.

So that's the proposition, investors. No apparent demand. Years of regulatory hurdles still ahead, and a cooling source that is shrinking as the planet warms. If that sounds like a path to riches, Blue Castle would like to hear from you.

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