INTRODUCTION:
More than a decade ago Georgia Power Company and its utility partners announced plans to build two new nuclear reactors at Plant Vogtle near Waynesboro along the Savannah River. Since then the project has traveled a road to financial ruin—for Georgia ratepayers, the contractors involved, and potentially, for the project owners. If the nuclear reactors are ever built, the Savannah River will be next in line to feel the brunt of this ruinous project. Costs for the project have more than doubled to around $28 billion. Westinghouse, the lead contractor that designed and was building the reactors, has declared bankruptcy. Its parent company, Toshiba, is also in financial peril. Taxpayers were forced to back an $8.3 billion federal loan for the private project with more proposed, and Georgia Power ratepayers are already paying extra on their monthly bills thanks to a 2009 law adopted by the Georgia General Assembly. Clean energy advocates foresaw this debacle years ago when they urged state leaders to look to less risky energy choices such as wind, solar and energy efficiency. Now, the Georgia Public Service Commission (PSC) must decide whether it makes sense to continue throwing good money after bad.

THE WATER BODY:
Flowing more than 300 miles along the Georgia-South Carolina state line, the Savannah River is Georgia’s second largest river basin. At the Georgia coast, it supports the fourth largest port in the United States. Up river, it is no less important, supplying drinking water for 1.4 million people, including its namesake city as well as Augusta, among other municipalities. Three federal reservoirs above Augusta provide recreational opportunities and hydropower for the region. Together Clarks Hill, Russell and Hartwell reservoirs attract 17.5 million visitors annually. Meanwhile, beneath the river’s surface is a treasure trove of biological diversity, including the federally protected Atlantic and shortnose sturgeons that spawn in the Savannah. The first river to be explored by Georgia’s founders in 1733, 280 years later it remains a vital part of the state’s economy and cultural and natural heritage.
THE DIRT:

In a state already at odds with neighboring states over the wise use of its water resources, Georgia, in its decision to embrace water-intensive nuclear power, has invested in a multi-billion dollar boondoggle that will place even more pressure on the state’s water resources.

The two additional reactors at Plant Vogtle will demand up to 74 million gallons a day, with more than half of that permanently removed from the river. If built, Vogtle’s four reactors could consume enough water each day to supply more than 1.1 million Georgians with drinking water.

Plant Vogtle’s expansion will also impact the already heavily burdened Savannah by discharging warm water back into the river, harming habitat for aquatic wildlife. The reactors also produce radioactive waste that must be permanently and safely stored. In Georgia, there’s already more than 2,490 metric tons of highly radioactive spent nuclear fuel in storage.

Then, there are the financial costs—much of it borne by consumers and taxpayers. The new Vogtle reactors have been funded, in part, by an anti-consumer, pay-in-advance scheme passed by the General Assembly in 2009. Between 2011 when utility customers began paying the rate hike for Vogtle, and 2016, nearly $2 billion was collected. Meanwhile construction costs have rocketed to $28 billion, about double the original estimate.

Though the reactors were supposed to be up and running by now, the earliest projected start up date is 2022. To finish the project, Georgia Power and its partners have already pursued $3.7 billion more in federal taxpayer-backed loans above and beyond the $8.3 billion the project has already received.

By February, the five elected commissioners of the PSC face a choice that will shape Georgia’s future: they can choose to continue down the ruinous path of new nuclear power, saddling utility customers with billions in additional Vogtle costs, or they can choose to invest in safe, affordable, water-wise and more sustainable energy options like wind, solar and energy efficiency.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

The Public Service Commission should reject Georgia Power’s recommendation to finish building Vogtle’s new reactors. Barring that, the PSC should deny any additional rate hikes for consumers to cover Vogtle’s rising construction costs and require shareholders of Georgia Power’s parent company, Southern Company, to shoulder the costs and risks.

Because the Vogtle project now depends on billions of dollars more in additional federal taxpayer bailouts, Congress and the Trump Administration should oppose new loans and tax credits for the project.

Finally, the Georgia General Assembly should repeal the Georgia Nuclear Energy Financing Act so that utility customers will no longer be forced to pay up front financing costs for the Vogtle project and to prevent any future nuclear boondoggles.

Top: Cooling towers at Plant Vogtle loom over the Savannah River. The two additional reactors at Plant Vogtle will demand up to 74 million gallons a day from the Savannah. Combined with already existing reactors, the facility could consume enough water to supply more than 1.1 million Georgians with drinking water.

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