

## Showdown at San Onofre



Harvey Wasserman

by **Harvey Wasserman** | January 7, 2013 - 9:36am

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Two stricken California reactors may soon redefine a global movement aimed at eradicating nuclear power.

They sit in a seismic zone vulnerable to tsunamis. Faulty steam generators have forced them shut for nearly a year.

A powerful “No Nukes” movement wants them to stay that way. If they win, the shutdown of America’s 104 licensed reactors will seriously accelerate.

The story of San Onofre Units 2 & 3 is one of atomic idiocy. *Perched on an ocean cliff between Los Angeles and San Diego*, the reactors’ owners cut unconscionable corners in replacing their multi-million-dollar steam generators. According to Russell Hoffman, one of California’s leading experts on San Onofre, *inferior metals and major design failures turned what was meant to be an upgrade into an utter fiasco.*

Installed by Mitsubishi, the generators simply did not work. When they were shut nearly a year ago, tubes were leaking, banging together and overall rendering further operations impossible.

Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric have unofficially thrown in the towel on Unit 3. But they’re lobbying hard to get at least Unit 2 back up and running. Their technical problems are so serious that they’ve asked the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to let them run Unit 2 at 70% capacity. In essence, they want to “see what happens” without daring to take the reactor to full power.

The **NRC** has expressed serious doubts. On December 26 it demanded answers to more than 30 questions about the plant’s technical realities. *There have been assertions that unless San Onofre can be shown as operable at full power, its license should be negated.*

San Onofre’s owners are desperate to get at least Unit 2 back on line so they can gouge the ratepayers for their failed expenditures. *If the California Public Utilities Commission refuses the request, there’s no way San Onofre can reopen.*

So nuclear opponents can now fight restart both at the federal level and with the state PUC. The state regulators have opened an in-depth investigation into what’s happened at San Onofre, and the picture is not expected to be pretty.

Economic analyses show the reactors to be uneconomical anyway. “Experts” warned California would suffer blackouts and brownouts without them, but nothing of the sort has happened. *The only real reason San Onofre’s owners want to get it back up is to charge the ratepayers for their failed repairs.*

The fiasco at **San Onofre** is being replayed at rust bucket reactors throughout the **US. Progress Energy** poked some major new holes into the containment at the **Crystal River reactor** it was allegedly fixing. Nebraska’s Ft. Calhoun has been flooded. An earthquake hit Virginia’s reactors with seismic forces that exceeded design specifications.

In Wisconsin, **Kewaunee’s** owners will shut it for economic reasons. A new study shows **Vermont Yankee**, under intense attack from a grassroots citizens’ upheaval, has major economic benefits to gain from shutting down. Elsewhere around the US, technical and economic pressures have the industry on the brink.

Meanwhile, the conversion to green power in Germany is booming. When 8 reactors were shut and the conversion to wind, solar and biomass became official policy, “experts” predicated energy shortages and soaring prices. But the opposite has happened as supply has boomed and prices have dropped.

The same things will happen in California and elsewhere as these radioactive jalopies begin to shut. The effectiveness of citizen activism in California is now vastly multiplied as these two decrepit reactors become increasingly obsolete, inoperable and economically insupportable.

As Kewaunee shuts, as Crystal River heads toward salvage, as **No Nukes citizen action** escalates, and as renewables and efficiency soar in performance and plummet in price, a green-powered era is dawning.

But as **Fukushima Unit 4’s** spent fuel pool teeters 100 feet in the air, we are reminded that the danger from the failed nuclear power experiment is far from over.

The two reactors at San Onofre linger on atop major earthquake fault lines, just steps away from an ocean that could wash over them as sure as it did at Fukushima.

The California No Nukes movement may indeed be on the brink of a major victory. But we had better get these reactors buried before disaster strikes yet again.

*Harvey Wasserman is author of SOLARTOPIA! OUR GREEN-POWERED EARTH and will speak Wednesday evening in Santa Monica (contact: [ilenep@sbglobal.net](mailto:ilenep@sbglobal.net)) for the shut-down of San Onofre.*

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**A B O U T   A U T H O R** Harvey Wasserman is author of HARVEY WASSERMAN'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES; SOLARTOPIA! OUR GREEN-POWERED EARTH and A GLIMPSE OF THE BIG LIGHT: LOSING PARENTS, FINDING SPIRIT, all at [www.harveywasserman.com](http://www.harveywasserman.com). He writes regularly on politics and the environment at [www.solartopia.org](http://www.solartopia.org) and [www.freepress.org](http://www.freepress.org).