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Published: Saturday, December 15, 2001 5:47 p.m. EST

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Groups plan to use terror threat to challenge licensing of two nuclear plants

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) -- Environmental and anti-nuclear groups plan to use the threat of terrorist attacks and questions about the safety of a new fuel to fight 20-year extensions of the licenses of two nuclear power plants.

The plants, McGuire on Lake Norman and Catawba on Lake Wylie near Rock Hill, S.C., have operated for nearly 20 years. New licenses would allow them to run into the early 2040s.

A licensing board of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission will meet Tuesday and Wednesday in Charlotte to hear the groups' claims. The board will decide by late January whether any of the claims merit a full hearing in a trial-like setting.

The Nuclear Information and Resource Service, an anti-nuclear group with an Asheville office, and the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, headquartered in Ashe County, are seeking the hearing.

The groups plan to argue the consequences of sabotage and terrorism at the plants, such as attacks on cooling-water systems, haven't been fully evaluated, according to papers filed with the commission.

Duke Power officials say because terrorist threats apply to all nuclear plants, security issues are too broad to be part of license renewal.

The groups also say the utility's plan to use fuel containing surplus weapons plutonium starting in 2007 will increase the aging of reactor parts and would kill 25 percent more people in a severe accident.

Duke Power has asked the commission not to consider the use of mixed-oxide fuel, arguing it's a separate issue from license renewal. The commission has indicated it agrees.

A three-member panel of administrative law judges, called an Atomic Safety and Licensing Board, will hold next week's meeting at the federal courthouse in Charlotte.

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