

Cloud seeding concerns aired

Mt. Shasta Herald, November 12, 2008

By Charlie Unkefer

Mount Shasta, Calif. - Forty concerned citizens met at the Flying Lotus Dance Studio in Mount Shasta on Nov. 5 to discuss PG&E's weather modification program for southern Siskiyou County, which is scheduled to begin Nov. 15.

The proposed project, which involves "cloud seeding" over a region east of McCloud, has created a wave of local concern since PG&E first announced its intentions on Oct. 22. The short notice of the project, coupled with concerns over the environmental and health impacts, inspired the "community conversation," which allowed those attending to ask questions and voice their opinions.

Featured speakers included Mount Shasta residents Angelina Cook, Joanna Welfley, and Miguel Mesa. Also present was Ric Costales, Siskiyou County's Natural Resource Specialist, who fielded numerous questions and attempted to clarify the County's position on the matter.

The science of cloud seeding

The issue at stake is a plan by PG&E to cloud seed a region east of McCloud, south of Medicine Lake, north of Burney and west of Big Valley. Cloud seeding is a process that involves injecting silver iodide aerosol into the atmosphere with the goal of creating higher precipitation rates in existing storm clouds. The added precipitation, says PG&E, will help promote the hydroelectric power generating capacity that exists in the McCloud and Pit River watersheds.

According to PG&E, residents can expect to see a 5-10% increase in winter precipitation in the target area. The program, which is scheduled to run through May 31, 2013, will occur only during the winter and early spring months, with the overall goal of increasing snow pack and run-off, as well as re-charging the springs, which contribute to river flows.

The meeting, which included a PowerPoint presentation titled the "Empowered Citizens' Report," addressed many questions and concerns that have been voiced since PG&E first announced its intentions. Included were questions over the toxicity of the seeding agent, silver iodide aerosol, as well as its potential effect on local and regional weather patterns. Many remained skeptical of PG&E's plans to "bio-engineer" the local weather and expressed their doubts over the idea of altering something as fundamentally natural as the weather.

Natural Resource Specialist responds

Ric Costales, Siskiyou County's Natural Resource Specialist, addressed many audience questions and concerns. Since PG&E announced its plan, Costales, who began his position with the county just last December, has gone to great

length to find out how the whole process came about. Prior to the Notice of Intention posted in the paper on Oct. 22, he knew nothing about the program. Though Costales expressed regret about how the information was released and admits that, from the outset, it looks suspicious, he stressed that the county was not trying to “pull anything over” on the people of Siskiyou County, and that the program, as far as he can tell, has gone through all of the proper channels. He did express regret, however, that there was limited opportunity for the public to learn about the project and voice their concerns. “I can assure that this would not have happened on my watch,” Costales told the attentive audience.

He outlined the history of the project, noting that because the equipment necessary to conduct the operation is located on private land (owned by Sierra Pacific), an Environmental Impact Report is not required unless the home county chooses to pursue the matter. In January 2006, after reviewing the program and conferring with county and state agencies, Siskiyou County officials deemed the previously existing EIRs as sufficient.

Panel seeks answers

Though cloud seeding is not a new technology, with California projects dating back to 1948, many present expressed a lack of understanding about what it actually entails and wanted to know more.

Presenter Miguel Mesa emphasized that though he is concerned about the implications of spraying chemicals into the air, he is not going to make any hasty judgments. “I’m willing to embrace science. I just want to know more,” he stated. Though PG&E asserts that its program has gone through rigorous environmental review and meets all environmental, health, and legal requirements, skeptics claim that comprehensive testing has been limited. The “California Water Plan Update Draft 2009,” a document prepared by the California Department of Water Resources, itself states, “No complete and rigorous comprehensive study has been made of all California Precipitation Projects.”

Meeting highlights

As stated in a follow-up e-mail circulated by the group, the key points expressed during the meeting were as follows:

- There is no proposed benefit to Siskiyou County, while there are potential hazards or costs to the county. The benefit of the project is to reduce energy costs for PG&E and its customers. Siskiyou County residents purchase their power from Oregon’s Pacific Power, not PG&E. If the project is successful in increasing precipitation, the county could at a minimum incur increased snow precipitation, requiring more removal.
- Siskiyou County approved this PG&E project in 2006 without requiring permit or environmental study. PG&E documentation and EIR reports from other projects were accepted by the Supervisors as enough information.

- According the proponents of cloud seeding, cloud seeding with silver iodide has no harmful environmental effects. They also state they cannot confirm cloud seeding projects are even effective or controllable.
- Silver Iodide is labeled a Class C, non-soluble, inorganic, hazardous chemical that pollutes water and soil by the Office of Environmental Health and Safety, UC Berkeley. Past cloud seeding projects have produced unexpected results including many deaths in the United States.

Course of Action

The course of action, as stated in the group's meeting minutes, is as follows:

- Write a generic letter requesting postponement of the project until CEQA study for the Pit-McCloud River Cloud Seeding Project is provided by PG&E. This letter is to be distributed to residents as a sample to submit to the Siskiyou County Board of Supervisors.
- Circulate a petition to postpone the project until CEQA reports are provided to the public.
- Encourage all concerned or confused citizens to call and or e-mail their representatives. They do not have to require CEQA unless we request it.

Next Meeting

The group has scheduled a follow-up "community conversation on weather modification" for this Wednesday, Nov. 12 at 7:30 p.m. at the Flying Lotus, 315 Mt. Shasta Blvd., Mt. Shasta 926-0527. Additionally, on Nov. 21, Mark Oliver will present his film "Voices Between the Mountains" as a fundraiser to help defray the cost of legal fees.