

Colstrip owner pushes closure past Christmas

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Two Colstrip Power Plant units earlier slated for December closure will burn into January, Talen Energy reported this week, adding that post-shutdown work will likely delay job cuts into mid-2020.

Postponing closure until January will get workers on the other side of the Christmas holiday, the company said, after which progress on shutting down the units will depend on weather and staffing.

"Our employees remain a primary focus for Talen Montana as we move ahead with the retirement of Colstrip Units 1 and 2. While the units will shut down in early January 2020, slightly later than the previously announced Dec. 31, 2019, date, there will still be much work to be done in the future," said Taryne Williams, Talen communications manager.

Last June, Talen and Puget Sound Energy, which split ownership of Units 1 and 2 equally, announced the units would be shut down by year's end because they are no longer economical. Built in the early 1970s, the units have become more expensive to operate and maintain, age being one factor, but the rising cost of coal being another. Combined, the units produce about 614 megawatts.

Coal power, once America's dominant source of electricity, has lost market share to natural gas, wind and solar. Gas is now the nation's largest producer of electricity. Complicating matters in Colstrip, the price of coal is expected to increase under a yet-to-be-announced new contract between the power plant's owners and Westmoreland Mining LLC, a group of creditors that bought Colstrip's Rosebud Mine at bankruptcy auction earlier this year.

There are roughly 100 workers at Units 1 and 2. Exactly how many of them will lose their jobs as a result of the shutdown is unclear, Williams said. That's because there's still work to be done once the units close, and also because there are other jobs opening up at the power plant as people leave for work elsewhere.

The decommissioning of Units 1 and 2 will last at least until the middle of next year, Williams said. There's also maintenance work planned for Colstrip Unit 4 in 2020, which will present another job opportunity for the workers of the units soon to be shuttered.

Talen hasn't issued pink slips, to the dismay of state labor officials who have received \$2 million in grant money for a Colstrip worker retraining program. The money has gone untouched since 2017 because workers must produce notice of a pending job loss to qualify for the money. Those are the rules for the Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization grant program, otherwise known as POWER grants.

Talen has tried to retain workers through the terms of a collective bargaining agreement approved earlier this year by 70% of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 1638.

Meanwhile, the town of Colstrip is gearing up to market itself as a good home for new businesses. Mayor John Williams said Colstrip offers a good lifestyle and the community plans to do what it can to spread the word.

"We haven't identified anything specifically, but were preparing ourselves for any type of entity that comes forward. We haven't identified any type of industry or development or anything like that," Williams said. "We're just getting the word out about the kind of great community we are."

No relation to Talen's Taryne Williams, the mayor said people shouldn't be under the impression that Colstrip will blow away as portions of the power plant close. There are years of remediation work that need to be done both at the power plant site and at its coal ash ponds. Talen is also changing the way it treats coal ash leaving the power plant.

"There's a lot of activities going on, particularly with work the power plants are doing on those ash ponds," Williams said.