

# The Nuclear Power Controversy in Skagit County, 1967-1983

In 1967, a push for nuclear power plants began. The goal of the companies involved was to create more power and increase profits, by selling power to California and the Southwest. This led to a series of events that affected residents on Samish Island, as well as other parts of Skagit County.

## Chronology to 1967

**1937** - FDR Signs the Bonneville Project Act, 1937.

BPA was directed "to encourage the widest possible use of all electric energy." Federal & Regional utilities began to build dams and generating facilities along the river systems. Hydropower attracted industries & provided jobs for a growing population. The Bonneville Project Act assured that any coop or public power utility would become "preference customers" of the Bonneville Power Administration, and would receive first power from any federally-owned dams.

**1965-1973** – BPA describes a coming energy shortage.

Because BPA must sell power first to "preference customers" (the public power companies), this left them less power to sell to private utilities in California and the Southwest, where they can make more money. Their investor-owned utility contracts were due to expire in 1973, and by then, they must have developed more sources of power. This led to a search for nuclear power sites, and the development of nuclear power plants, for additional energy resources.

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## Chronology 1967 to 1973

**1967 – July 1.** Batelle Northwest of Richland, WA identifies sixty possible sites for Nuclear Power Plants in the Northwest.

The report was prepared for Bonneville Power Administration (contract No. 14-03-67868) to help it fulfill its contracts to supply cheap power to California, as it indicates in the report. The report mentions four sites on the west side of Whidbey Island, San Juan Strait, and the Bellingham area. ("Where has all the Power Gone?" Draft of SCANP Document, circa 1971, available at the Skagit Valley Historical Museum).

**1967** – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers seeks to build Alaska's Ramparts Dam on the Yukon River.

Indicating that it could sell the large surplus of power generated by dams, to the Pacific Northwest, the Corps of Engineers sought to build new dams. At the same time, Dan Swift of the Bonneville Power Administration is quoted as saying, "we have all the power we need in the Pacific Northwest."

**1968 – March.** John Nelson of Seattle City Light told the Seattle City Council that he intends to buy Kiket Island in Skagit County.

**1968 - May.** In May, citizens learn that Seattle City Light and Snohomish PUD #1 had already jointly purchased a large portion of Samish Island at Point William.

The stated purpose for Kiket Island is to build a nuclear power complex of two or more plants, of 1000 plus megawatts each. The stated purpose for Samish Island is to build a similar or even larger nuclear power plant complex than that of Kiket Island.

While John Nelson knew of the Battelle Northwest Report to Bonneville Power Administration in July 1967, he did not select any of those 60 proposed sites. Instead he picked Kiket and Samish Islands, neither of which are mentioned by Battelle. Both of these islands are in estuaries of salmon-producing rivers, which means their waters should not be used as coolant for nuclear plants. The Dept of Fish & Game, Pollution Control Commission, Bureau of Commercial Fisheries and knowledgeable fishermen agree that to heat water through which migrating salmon would swim would be most disruptive and probably disastrous....It would seem obvious that Kiket and Samish are not good choices for nuclear power sites.

Nevertheless, Bonneville public relations men attended and spoke at many, if not all, the rallies that Seattle City Light and Snohomish P.U.D #1 held to swing public support. The glamorous figures of power needs that BPA and power company men used to befuddle the public were concocted with Boeing and its suppliers running full throttle, with 5 or 6 aluminum plants in mind for Skagit County. These plus the contractual obligations to California utilities, would lay waste to all the delta areas in Skagit County. They would put an end to the State Parks, the desirable residential areas and the wonderful recreational uses of Skagit County's waters.... In the face of all this, we are asked to believe we are short of power. Whenever these facts are brought forth those ever-ready P.R. men are willing to enlighten the listener. They quote all kinds of statistics and reasons; they give unusual meaning to commonplace words; in fact, anything to obscure the facts." ("Where has all the Power Gone?" SCANP Document, circa 1971, available at the Skagit Valley Historical Museum)

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**1968 – May.** BPA completes the first of two 500,000-volt AC current lines to California from the Columbia River. The second 500,000-volt line is completed in December 1968.

All the power from the proposed Skagit plants, the Boundary Dam, and Centralia plant would be sold to California for years to come. (from the Bonneville Annual Report 1969, page 30, quoted in SCANP Document "Where has all the power gone?").

**1969 - June 30.** Seattle City Council approves Seattle City Light's **purchase of Kiket Island**. See drawing of **proposed facility at Kiket**.

**1969 – December.** BPA completes the first of two 800,000-volt DC current lines to Southern California, providing 1.4 million kilowatts of power.

The three lines now in existence will carry 3.4 million kilowatts of power to California from the Northwest.

**1969 – October 9.** "Strong Reservations on Kiket Nuclear Power Plant", Seattle Times, p. 4.

Seattle City Council expresses reservations about the purchase of Kiket for a nuclear power plant.

**1970** – Skagit County Democrats approve a “Resolution Concerning Location of Nuclear-Fueled, Thermal-Electric Power Plants” March 19, 1970. Text of this resolution:

**...whereas** nuclear plants are planned on Kiket Island, Samish Island and other places in ecologically rich Puget Sound waters....

**...whereas**, the generating capacity of each such power plant is planned to be 1000 megawatts electric, and

**...whereas**, for each 1000-megawatts of useful power developed, more than 2000 megawatts of waste heat is produced which is a tremendous waste of a natural resource, and

**...whereas**, this waste heat is planned to be dumped into the adjacent waters, and

**...whereas**, upwards of 750,000 gallons per minute of cooling water is required for each 1000 megawatt unit, and

**...whereas**, the effect of thermal pollution on the passage, growth and spawning of the natural biota in Puget Sound and nearby river estuaries is not known, and

**...whereas**, biocides, toxicants and other cooling chemicals necessary for cleaning, defouling, and biological control of growth in the cooling water circuit are routinely discharged into the waters surrounding such power plants, and

**...whereas**, eggs, embryos, larvae and small fish will pass the intake screening facility and may be destroyed in the hot water of the cooling circuit, and

**...whereas**, during operation, nuclear power plants do release some radioactive waste material which may be concentrated in the tissues of resident species likely to be eaten by man, such as clams and crabs, and

**...whereas**, Destruction of the natural biota can be prevented by rejection of the waste heat into cooling ponds or cooling towers, and

**...whereas**, the potential exists to use the waste cooling water by piping to farmlands to warm the soil, ward off frost, lengthen the growing season, and perhaps make two crops grow where nature allows but one;

**Now, Therefore, Be It Resolved**, by the Washington State Democratic Central Committee that

... the huge thermal electric power plants be required to dispose of their waste heat by cooling ponds or cooling towers

... electric utilities and institutions of higher learning be encouraged to find beneficial uses for the waste heat resources.

**Be It Further Resolved** that

...copies of this resolution be furnished to the Thermal Electric Plant Site Evaluation Council, the Mayor of Seattle, the Snohomish County PUD, The Puget Sound Power and Light Company, and the Press.

**1972** - The plan for Kiket Island and Samish Island is shelved.

Seattle Mayor Wes Uhlman and City Light Superintendent Gordon Vickery (1920-1996) decided that there is no immediate future for nuclear power plants in those locations. "No Active Plan For Kiket Island Plant Says Vickery," The Seattle Times, October 28, 1972, p. A-9;

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## **Chronology 1973-1983**

**1973** – "Skagit County Drafting N-Power-Plant Zoning Controls", article in the Seattle Times, April 15,1973. Excerpts from the article:

"Skagit County planning officials are developing zoning regulations to permit them to review and control the nuclear

power plant Puget Sound Power and Light Co. wants to build near Sedro Woolley. But one code section would do far more than that. It would prevent City Light and Snohomish County Public Utility District from ever planning or building nuclear projects on Kiket Island and Samish Island, both potential Skagit County sites.”

“.....Puget Sound Power Light Co. said it suggested the restriction to satisfy requests from Skagit County residents worried about the City Light-Snohomish P.U.D. projects – not to revive the old public-vs.-private power conflict or edge out a competitor.”

“.... Despite Puget Power’s motives, both City Light and Snohomish County PUD officials are disturbed by the proposed zoning-code section which would prohibit issuing a permit for a thermal power plant “unless the plant is set back one mile or more from ..any saltwater shoreline.” [City Light and Snohomish County PUD] have sent letters of objection to Puget Power and to the Skagit County Planning Commission which will conduct a public hearing on the amendment at 8 p.m. tomorrow, [April 16, 1973] in the Skagit County Courthouse in Mount Vernon.”

“City Light and the PUD say the saltwater ban would rule out construction on Kiket or Samish without giving the utilities an opportunity to prove the feasibility and desirability of projects there.”

“Puget Power attorneys helped write the text for the new unclassified-use section of the zoning code. It generally describes how the county will review a project and requires a project sponsor to pay a \$10,000 fee to help the county pay for its studies.”

“...Gordon Vickery, City Light superintendent, said the section restricting salt-water projects is “like a sore thumb” in a document describing review procedures. Vickery said plans for Kiket and Samish Island nuclear projects “are on the shelf...but not dead.”

“...Objections to the Kiket project from some residents and citizen groups in Skagit County and Western Washington have been strong. Some government agencies also oppose the

project arguing that a major plant would cause substantial harm to the marine environment.”

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**1973 – August.** Puget Sound Power & Light seeks a contract rezone of the proposed Bacus Hill nuclear power plant site, east of Sedro Woolley. (Bellingham Herald, August 28, 1973)

“If the rezone is legal, Puget Power may withdraw its request for an unclassified use amendment to the Skagit County comprehensive plan and instead push for a contract rezone which could cut as much as four months off the time before the plan can get the final go-ahead on construction. A contract rezone differs from a simple rezone in that it spells out conditions under which a nuclear plant could be built east of Sedro Woolley. In effect, it eliminates a second environmental plan.”

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**1973 –** BPA’s power contracts with its investor-owned utility customers expire.

The agency was not able to renew those contracts because “preference customers” i.e. the cooperatives and public utility districts’ needs were growing. They had - and still have - first priority to power from Federal dams.

**1973 –** Sedro-Woolley Courier Times publishes article “Skagit Nuclear Project,” January 23.

Skagit County Planning Commission public hearing schedules a public hearing January 28 for closing arguments in a public hearing on Puget Power’s request for a rezone for its proposed nuclear power plant. The commission must make a recommendation to the county commissioners involving a 1430-acre site at Bacus Hill, located near Lyman. Puget Power wants 260-acre portion rezoned to industrial, with remainder forestry-recreational.

**1975 –** BPA holds a Public Hearing on Wednesday, September 10, 1975 in the Sedro-Woolley High School Little Theater, 4th and Nelson, in Sedro Woolley.

The purpose of the hearing is to provide a detailed description of the Bacus Hill Nuclear Project (a.k.a. Puget Sound Power and Light Company's "Skagit Thermal Plant"). Encourages public input to the "unavoidable adverse impacts."

**1976** - BPA informs preference customers that it can't guarantee to meet their load growth. That...

After 1983, no guarantees for power were certain. Both public and investor-owned utilities turn to costly nuclear and coal-fired plants to meet energy needs. No more sites are available for major hydropower development. There is no longer an inexhaustible supply of cheap power. Need for a new mechanism to plan and finance additional energy resources. Congress is called upon to look for some answers.

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**1978** – U.S. News and World Report (May 29, 1978) publishes article on nuclear energy.

Summary: "the cost of nuclear energy is far outpacing the general rate of inflation...between 1973 and 1976 the cost of generating nuclear power shot up by 600%. ... orders for 16 nuclear reactors were cancelled in the past three years. 66 more were deferred. Babcock and Wilcox, one of four reactor manufacturers has reduced its workforce by 1/3." (Page 37).

**1978** – "Puget Not Concerned about Fault", Bellingham Herald, October 11, 1978.

"Geologist Fred Pessl, said his studies indicate there could have been seismic movement along the fault in the past 13,000 to 15,000 years. Evidence of possible movement was found 15 miles southeast of the plant site along the fault line, which runs from Gilligan Creek, three miles south of the site.... The findings could prompt the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission which licenses nuclear plants, to deny Puget's permit or impose more stringent earthquake design standards. ....Puget spokesman Bill Merry said the utility has known about this feature for five years. Our geologists say it was a landslide, what engineers call an offset, a dead fault. We have mapped it thoroughly." President John E. Ellis said "we don't expect this feature to be a

matter of concern to the seismic design of the project.”  
(Bellingham Herald, October 11, 1978)

**1978** – “Skagit Nuclear Plant Hearings Must Wait,” Skagit Valley Herald, October 12, 1978.

“Richard Black, chief counsel for the NRC on the Skagit project said he could not foresee the federal hearings beginning again until sometime next year. .... Black blamed the delay on the continued controversy over suspected earthquake dangers at the plant’s proposed Bacus Hill site near Sedro-Woolley. ... Geologist Fred Pessl, a consultant for the U.S. Geological Survey, released a preliminary study revealing the presence of a suspected active earthquake fault near the plant site... and evidence of possible movement 15 miles southeast of the plant site....Puget Power is currently completing seismic tests of the region around the Gilligan Creek area. These tests...were requested by the NRC in May of this year. In November, the NRC is expected to review these findings, according to another NRC geologist. After reviewing the report next month, we could then require additional information.” (Skagit Valley Herald, October 12, 1978)

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**1978** – “Earthquake Fault Debate Delays Plant Hearings,” Bellingham Herald, October 13, 1978.

“Continued debate about possible earthquake faults near the Skagit Valley site of planned nuclear power plants will delay hearings until next year, says a federal attorney..... Richard Black, chief counsel for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on the Skagit Project, said in an interview from his Washington DC office that no more steps in the hearing procedures will be taken until geologic and seismic questions are answered.”

**1979** – Henry Jackson introduces a bill expanding the power of BPA.

Jackson's bill tries to eliminate the “preference clause” which since 1937 had allowed cooperatives and public utilities districts to have first priority at electricity from federal dams.

**1979** – 72% of Skagit County voters cast ballots against the nuclear project at Sedro Woolley.

The NRC announced that licensing hearings were to be delayed indefinitely. Discovery of an earthquake fault and several other problems provide roadblocks to the project.

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**1980** – Puget Power announces plans to transfer the Skagit nuclear project to Hanford, in July.

**1980** – Congress passes the Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act.

This act established the Northwest Power Planning Council (publicly accountable body) to conduct regional energy planning and review new authority given to BPA to finance resources & conservation. Governors of 4 states, WA, ID, MT, OR each appoint two members to Council.

Congressional charge to the Northwest Electric Planning Council:

- Determine how much energy the region will need during the next 20 years and develop an electric power plan (electrical demand forecast) to meet those needs.
- Develop a program to “protect, mitigate and enhance” fish and wildlife and related habitat in the Columbia River Basin, which have been seriously affected by hydroelectric development.
- The Act recognizes for the first time that fish and wildlife are coequal with power needs.
- The Council is not a federal agency. It receives funding from BPA budget (not the federal treasury), but is not part of BPA.
- The Act limits funding based on BPA power sales.
- BPA will use the plan to decide what major projects to sponsor.
- BPA will bring resources larger than 50 megawatts to the Council for approval. If Council decides that the resource is not consistent with its plan, BPA would need Congressional approval before purchasing resources.
- The Council has no authority to issue permits for power facilities. States are responsible for decision regarding the construction of new power plants. Council may not modify state, federal or individual water rights.

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**1980** – Seattle City Council approves the sale of Kiket Island in 1980.

Seattle City Council Resolution 26414, September 22, 1980, Seattle Municipal Archives: It is unclear when Seattle City Light and Snohomish PUD will sell Samish Island properties, at this writing.

**1983** - Northwest Power Planning Council Draft Energy Plan is released in February 1983. Public hearings followed. Adopted April 27, 1983.

**1983** - [WPPSS Default](#) (as reported by HistoryLink.org)

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### Key Players:

<p>Bonneville Power Administration (BPA)</p>	<p>Established by the Bonneville Power Act of 1937. The Act was passed by Congress and signed into law by FDR. The purpose of the Act is "to encourage the widest possible use of all electric energy," and to assure that any coop or public power utilities become "preference customers" and receive first power from any federally owned dams.</p>
<p>Battelle Northwest of Richland, WA</p>	<p>A company hired by Bonneville Power Administration in 1967 (contract No. 14-03-67868) to recommend possible sites for nuclear power plants in the Northwest, in order to help BPA to fulfill its contracts to supply cheap power to California.</p> <p>They selected 60 possible nuclear power plant sites, mentioning four sites on the west side of Whidbey Island, San Juan Strait, and the Bellingham area. The report was presented in 1967.</p>
<p>Seattle City Light</p>	<p>Buys Kiket Island in 1968, for the purpose of building a nuclear power complex of two or more towers, of 1000 plus megawatts each. Kiket Island was not one of the sites recommended by the 1967 Battelle report.</p>
<p>Snohomish PUD #1</p>	<p>In partnership with Seattle City Light, Snohomish</p>

	<p>PUD #1 purchases Point Williams on Samish Island in 1968, in order to build a similar or even larger nuclear power plant complex than that of Kiket Island. Samish Island was not one of the sites recommended by the 1967 Battelle report.</p>
<p>Puget Sound Power &amp; Light Company</p>	<p>Intended to build a nuclear power plant at Bacus Hill outside Sedro-Woolley near Lyman, around 1970. They ask for a contract rezone in 1973, to try to speed up the process. By 1980, they abandon Bacus Hill and move the project to Hanford.</p>
<p>Skagitonians Concerned About Nuclear Power (SCANP)</p>	<p>A citizen's group formed to counter the efforts of the large power companies, which planned to locate nuclear power plants on the deltas and prime river estuaries of Skagit County, jeopardizing commercial fishing grounds, state parks and the beautiful environmental assets of the Valley. The group had wide support from all over Western Washington, and many donors gave money toward defeating the proposed thermal energy plants.</p>
<p>Skagit County Planning Commission</p>	<p>In 1973, Skagit County planning officials developed zoning regulations that would allow them to review and control the nuclear power plant that Puget Sound Power and Light Co. wanted to build near Sedro Woolley.</p> <p>One code section would require the county to review any project, and require a project sponsor to pay a \$10,000 fee to help the county pay for the review. In effect, this zoning regulation would prevent City Light and Snohomish County Public Utility District from planning or building nuclear projects on Kiket Island and Samish Island, both potential Skagit County sites. Seattle City Light and Snohomish PUD protest this clause in the Skagit County comprehensive plan.</p>
<p>Skagit County Voters</p>	<p>In 1979, 72% of Skagit County voters cast ballots against the nuclear project at Sedro-Woolley.</p>

Henry Jackson	Tries to help BPA by introducing legislation (1979) that would overturn the "preference clause" which guarantees public utility districts and coops first access to BPA Power. BPA can make more money from private industries & purchasers, and wants to sell power at higher rates to them. The "preference clause" of the 1937 act has been restraining them.
U.S. Geological Survey	Fred Pessl, a geologist for the U.S. Geological Survey, investigates the earthquake fault under the Bacus Hill proposed nuclear site, in 1978. Puget Sound Power says they've known about it for 5 years and it is "an old dead fault". Pessl finds evidence of movement during the past 15 years.
Nuclear Regulatory Commission	The Federal agency that approves all nuclear power plant licensing.
U.S. Economy	The <b>high inflation and interest rates</b> during this period of time, also effectively brought the nuclear power plant ideas to a halt in most parts of the country.

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## Sources

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The information above was compiled by Eileen Andersen, for the Samish Island website, using primary source documents available at the Skagit County Historical Museum.