

Controversial natural gas-powered pilot renewed by UO, EWEB

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University of Oregon and Eugene Water & Electric Board have extended a controversial pilot program that would increase greenhouse gas emissions in Eugene.

The agreement allows EWEB to access UO's natural gas-fired turbine to produce more electricity, especially during times of peak demand such as during cold winter weather. According to EWEB, 80% of the electricity it provides to its consumers comes from hydropower, but that source could become less reliable in a changing climate. In a dry year with low river levels, energy shortfalls are possible and could even happen this year, according to EWEB. The pilot is meant to serve as a way to explore other options.

"Having flexible, local generation resources gives EWEB more visibility and influence over how electricity is produced to meet Eugene's needs, rather than relying solely on distant power plants operating elsewhere in the region," Brian Booth, EWEB's chief energy resource officer, stated in a news release. "Even though we haven't turned on the generator yet this winter, this study is strengthening local coordination and preparedness, and we have a highly efficient resource on standby if it's needed."

The study launched in early January and was set to end on Feb. 28, but because EWEB hasn't needed to turn on the turbine, the pilot will be extended through the end of March.

How would UO generate electricity?

The pilot involves a natural gas turbine at UO's Central Power Station at

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Pilot

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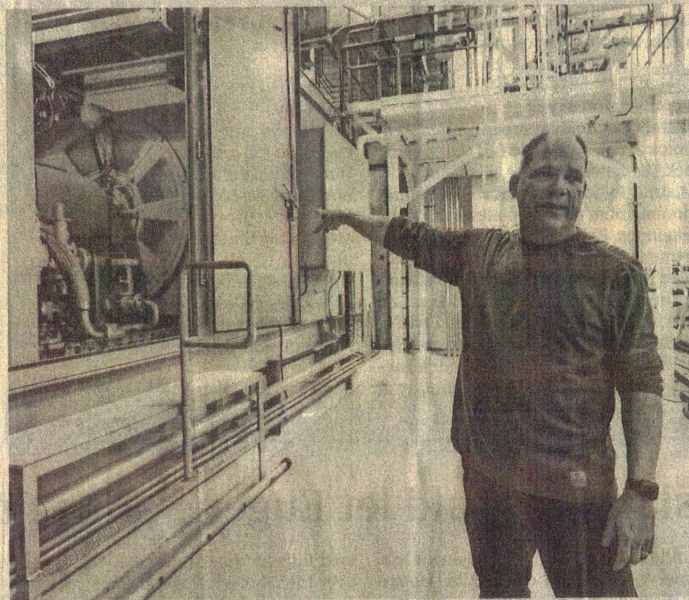
Onyx Street and Franklin Boulevard. This Combustion Turbine Generator was built in 2011 but has largely been unused. It is kept functional as a backup.

Steve Mital, director of UO's Office of Sustainability and director of utilities and energy, told The Register-Guard the turbine uses natural gas fuel and can produce up to 8 megawatts of power, which translates to powering anywhere from 2,000 to 10,000 homes. The system also has a Steam Turbine Generator that can produce another 2 megawatts at full capacity.

While emissions would be increased in Eugene — a 65% increase on UO's Scope 1 emissions — the hope is state-wide, emissions would decrease. That has not yet been tested. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Scope 1 emissions are direct greenhouse emissions that occur from sources owned by an organization. UO's heating system is Eugene's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

EWEB and UO leaders said UO's turbine is more efficient than other power sources EWEB might contract with around the state. This is because UO has a mechanism that allows it to use the turbine's waste heat to heat campus, allowing UO to turn off one of its two gas-powered boilers.

A news release from EWEB stated if the turbine is still not needed before the end of March, the pilot period might be extended again.



Paul Langley, associate director and operations and maintenance superintendent, explains how power generation works at the University of Oregon's Central Power Station on Jan. 15 in Eugene.

BEN LONERGAN/THE REGISTER-GUARD

Why are climate groups pushing against the University of Oregon and EWEB pilot?

Local climate activist groups criticized UO and EWEB not only for the project itself but a lack of publicity about it. These groups found out about the pilot

through word of mouth. The only publicized record of the pilot before its launch was the UO Office of Sustainability's December newsletter.

"It's outrageous," Dylan Plummer, acting deputy director of Sierra Club's Clean Heat Campaign, told The Register-Guard in January. "University of

Oregon, rather than working to electrify their boilers and transition away from fossil fuels, has made a decision to actually expand fossil fuel use on campus without talking to the community, without talking to students, and without really giving any justification for their actions."

A number of UO student groups, campus labor unions and community organizations submitted a letter to EWEB on Feb. 2, calling for immediate cancellation of the pilot. At the same time, UO's Climate Justice League student group launched an open letter to the UO Board of Trustees, which has gotten more than 3,300 signatures, calling for the same thing.

"Students have been calling for the UO to cut its climate-heating emissions for years, and in that time, it has used every trick in the book to delay action," stated Jack Dodson, UO student and organizer for the Climate Justice League, via email. "By once again refusing to let students and community members provide input on the new pilot project, the UO is showing it cares about profits more than the people it's supposed to serve."

UO has committed to emission neutrality by 2050, according to its Climate Action Plan (CAP). Student groups continue to put pressure on this goal by speaking out at board meetings and holding rallies.

Plummer stated the groups had not received a response from EWEB or the trustees as of Feb. 27.

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