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The nuclear option: Nuclear power no panacea for reducing global warming

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Is the expansion of the nuclear power industry, which produces no greenhouse gases, a big part of the solution to the global warming problem, as the Bush administration and some state officials claim? Or does it amount to trading one evil for an even greater evil?

Those are urgent questions. A state legislative panel is drafting legislation to make it easier for nuclear power plants to be built in Utah, which has no commercial reactors. And the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission expects to receive up to 30 applications for new reactors in the United States by 2010, as the domestic industry appears poised for a comeback.

In the United States, 104 nuclear reactors at 65 power plants in 31 states produce more than 19 percent of our electricity. It's an important part of our nation's energy portfolio. But when it comes to solving environmental problems and filling our long-term energy needs, nuclear power is no panacea. There hasn't been a permit issued to build a new nuclear power plant in the United States for more than two decades, and for good reasons.

Nuclear power is too expensive for consumers and too slow off the mark to have an immediate impact on global warming. It costs about \$2 billion and takes more than a decade to bring a new plant online. Also, there are serious security concerns, post 9/11. Terrorists paint bull's-eyes on nuclear reactors. Fuel could fall into the wrong hands.

And, after more than 20 years of trying, the government has yet to build a permanent storage facility for the radioactive waste generated by power plants. Tons of spent but still-lethal fuel are stored at power plants while plans for a permanent repository hang in limbo. And Utah officials are fighting an attempt by private industry to build a temporary waste storage facility on the Skull Valley Goshute reservation 45 miles southwest of Salt Lake City.

Plus, the mining and processing of uranium for nuclear fuel harms the environment. Even as the government spends many millions of dollars to clean up waste from the last uranium mining boom in Utah, the long-dormant industry is on the cusp of another, just as the world's known uranium deposits dwindle toward zero.

But the No. 1 reason for removing nuclear power from the global warming equation: A major accident at a nuclear power plant could kill thousands of people and render tens of thousands of acres uninhabitable.

The industry has a spotty safety record. About 30 reactors have been shut down for at least a year for safety repairs since the 1980s. And while the near meltdown at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979 stands out, there have been other close calls.

In the final analysis, it's better for the state and federal governments to put our energy eggs in the clean and green renewable energy basket. Solar, wind and geothermal power have tremendous potential, and none of the risks of nuclear power.

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