

New nuclear plants signal future power generation

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Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Gregory Jaczko speaks to members of the media Thursday, Nov. 10, 2011 in Atlanta. U.S. Jaczko spoke Thursday about the status of new reactors slated for Georgia and South Carolina after the accident at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant in Japan. (David Goldman, Associated Press)

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission turned heads this week by approving licenses for two new nuclear power reactors in Georgia. These are the first such licenses to be granted in the United States since 1978. They also signal what has to be considered an inevitable trend back toward nuclear power.

Even Rocky Mountain Power's president, A. Richard Walje, told us last week he envisions nuclear power being a part of future power generation in this region. The reasons are clear. While renewable energy, such as from wind and solar generators, will continue to develop and produce a growing share of the area's needs, they aren't likely to produce enough, and the type of generation they provide cannot handle peak demands. The worst summertime heat often comes on days where there is little wind. Also, with the government imposing ever-more restrictions on the environmental impacts of coal and natural gas generators, nuclear becomes the best clean alternative for generating massive amounts of power.

This does not, however, mean the nation, or the state of Utah, should rush headlong into nuclear power generation. In the wake of last year's meltdown at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi facility, extra precautions should be taken to ensure safety in the event of the worst catastrophes possible. For their part, governments should be careful not to saddle taxpayers with the cost of outrageous subsidies for construction and operation.

On the other side, however, it does not mean the environmental community should continue to carry the day with 35-year-old arguments about safety and costs that ignore technological advances. The Georgia plants will be constructed using a passive cooling system that requires much less water than traditional nuclear plants. A similar type system is being proposed in Utah, where water is scarce. Also, the Georgia plants are supposed to be designed to safely endure a complete power blackout without overheating nuclear fuel rods. Much more is bound to be learned from the Fukushima disaster, making future designs that much safer.

Meanwhile, 104 nuclear plants continue in operation nationwide, and the United States has yet to suffer one radiation death from any of them. Even the oft-referenced Three Mile Island disaster in 1979 did not result in a single death.

But the Georgia plants will require massive federal loan guarantees. That puts taxpayers at risk if those who are building the plants were to default. The cost of nuclear power generation always has been a major concern. But with the government trying to limit carbon dioxide emissions — the president's stated goal has been to do so by 80 percent over the next 40 years — coal and natural gas plants become far less attractive when compared with nuclear.

The NRC decision does not mean nuclear plants will begin popping up all over the nation in short order. The permits themselves are likely to face a legal challenge from environmentalists. It may take years before we know whether nuclear power remains the generator of the future.

If it isn't, however, the nation will have to come up with some acceptable alternative. At the moment, that list is extremely short.

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