



## States look to act on nuclear power



By Devin Henry - 06/22/15 06:00 AM EDT

Lawmakers in statehouses are looking for ways to support nuclear power close to home.

Efforts across the country could spark more action than has occurred lately on the federal level.

Debates over the future of nuclear power in Illinois and New York are the most pressing of the industry's concerns, but the issue has emerged elsewhere. Initiatives at the local level have moved along slowly, but industry-watchers say that even by considering nuclear action, states are at least looking for ways to go where Congress hasn't.

"We're seeing more conversation, but not necessarily more action," said Samuel Brinton, a fellow at the centrist think tank Third Way. "Legislation across the states has been: Do we need this now, and how do we make it better?"

In Illinois, lawmakers are grappling with how to prevent three nuclear plants from shutting down. A handful of bills to fund the power plants were introduced this year, but the state legislature adjourned its spring session before voting on them.

Industry officials say they expect the issue to be on lawmakers' to-do list when they return for the fall term.

"There is a need in Illinois and in many U.S. states to act proactively to maintain the jobs, economic benefits and carbon-free benefits of nuclear plants," said former Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), co-chairman of the industry group Nuclear Matters. "We're hopeful that this legislation [in Illinois] can serve as a model for the types of policies and solutions that other states can look to when assessing how best to value nuclear energy plants and to ensure these critical national assets continue to operate for the sake of our energy security."

In New York, the nuclear industry is pushing back against Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo's stated desire to close the Indian Point nuclear plant outside of New York City. Cuomo's energy and finance chairman told a state Senate committee in May that the administration is working on "multiple fronts" to shut down the plant.

So far, Cuomo hasn't been able to do that, though he ramped up criticism of the plant after a small fire there last month. The nuclear industry has defended the plant, and Brinton said officials there beefed up their safety standards after the accident to rebut the attacks.

Lawmakers elsewhere have tried to ease the way ahead for nuclear in their states.

Maine Gov. Paul LePage (R) introduced a bill this session that would have removed a state requirement that a new nuclear plant generating fewer than 500 megawatts of electricity go through a public referendum. Lawmakers considered the bill, but watered it down and removed the referendum provision.

Indiana state Sen. Jim Merritt (R) has pushed to create the regulatory framework necessary to bring nuclear to his state. With forthcoming Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rules on power plant carbon emissions, he said the state's utilities should look to move to nuclear.

"In our state, we are so dependent on coal, and with the federal government going the direction they are with the EPA, it makes all the sense in the world for us to embrace nuke power," he said.

Officials in Oregon considered a bill this year to fund a task force to look into nuclear power. Washington already has a nuclear task force, and one of its members, Republican state Sen. Sharon Brown, introduced nine measures to support nuclear energy efforts in the state this session.

She was able to get components of those bills through the Senate this year, including funding for a small modular reactor study and a nuclear education program. They're still alive as lawmakers hash out a final budget plan for the year.

Brown said the education component is needed both to train future nuclear engineers as well as inform the public about the issue.

"Once I explain all that to a lot of people, I think they kind of think, well, maybe I do need to give a new look to this technology," she said. "So that's really what my focus has been."

Movement on nuclear matters is more static in Washington, D.C., where the industry's focus has been on rule changes from regulators, especially on safety.

Republican control of Congress could translate into more activity in the nation's capital. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman James Inhofe (R-Okla.) may intensify congressional oversight of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

Inhofe is concerned that the NRC's new safety standards could be too burdensome. This year, the GOP senator has held hearings on the agency's expanding budget and workload.

For now, though, most of the nation's policymaking is happening in the states.

"It is colloquial and it is true that all politics is local," Brown, the state legislator from Washington, said. "It's definitely going to be state-led efforts."

Third Way's Brinton agreed.

"The conversation has shifted to the state perspective," he said. "And we need to make sure that federal policymakers still have a handle on what's going on in the states."

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*This article is part of America's Nuclear Energy Future series, sponsored by the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI). For more information about NEI, visit [nei.org/futureofenergy](http://nei.org/futureofenergy).*

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