

Energy secretary sees nuclear power in America's future

Renewable » Utah's governor-to-be welcomes Chu's message.

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Park City » Solar, wind, geothermal, hydro and carbon-dioxide capture rank high on President Barack Obama's priority list for developing "renewable" energy. But so does nuclear power.

"Nuclear has to be part of the mix," Energy Secretary Steven Chu said Monday. "It's clean, base-load energy."

Chu, speaking to the Western Governors' Association in Deer Valley, said loan guarantees included in the federal stimulus package could cover three or four new nuclear-power plants.

Utah's governor-in-waiting welcomed Chu's nuclear message.

After the session, Lt. Gov. Gary Herbert, poised to replace Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. once the latter is confirmed as Obama's ambassador to China, said the nation "got scared with Three Mile Island," the core meltdown that struck a Pennsylvania plant in 1979.

Herbert wants to see more investment in nuclear power once new federal regulations become clear.

A Utah company, Transition Power, is moving to build a nuclear plant in Emery County along the Green River. Nils Diaz, past chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, is Transition Power's executive policy adviser.

No new nuclear plant has been constructed since Three Mile Island.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told the governors that restarting the industry would require specialized training for construction workers.

Universities have cut back on nuclear-engineering programs, Chu noted, a trend that won't reverse unless the industry appears certain to have a future. But he said the problems of waste, safety and possible proliferation of weapons-grade material, considered by anti-nuclear activists as insurmountable, can be solved.

Obama's visiting Cabinet members agreed with the governors that the West's renewable energy cannot be fully developed without building more power lines to funnel solar, wind, hydro and geothermal energy to the market.

The governors signed a pact with the feds to take wildlife habitat and migration into account when planning where to build new transmission lines.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, making yet another visit to Utah, said federal renewable-energy planning offices will open for business in California, Arizona, Wyoming and Nevada. There, experts will fast-track renewable-energy projects rather than allow them to languish in the bureaucratic mire.

Getting transmission lines up and running has been a priority for Huntsman.

Chu noted that the United States has "lost [its] lead" in energy development to China, where transmission lines are allowed to be much bigger than here in order to move more power, faster.

"You don't want little lines," Chu said.

"Smart-grid" technology, an automated system to move transmission efficiently, has been stalled for a couple of years. The Energy Department, Chu said, now is enlisting help from utilities and other companies to set standards.

"It will take a couple of decades to build out new transmission," he said -- about the same time it will take to develop commercial-scale renewable power, so they must be planned together.