

Call for nuclear plants won't make much difference in Utah plans

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A panel of the National Academy of Sciences said in a 143-page report released Monday that the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Nuclear Energy should assign its highest priority to facilitating the startup of new commercial nuclear-power plants.

The recommendation by the academy's National Research Council might seem like strong encouragement to Transition Power Development, which hopes to build a two-unit nuclear generating plant somewhere in eastern Utah. The plant would cost around \$3 billion and generate 3,000 megawatts of electricity.

Transition Power, whose principals include state Rep. Aaron Tilton, R-Springville, recently signed a water-supply contract with Kane County Water Conservancy District, whose director is Rep. Mike Noel, R-Kanab.

But in an interview Monday, Tilton said the funding issue is immaterial, because Transition Power is not looking at using Energy Department incentives.

To date, he said, "we have not counted on or calculated for applying for Department of Energy incentives."

The council also recommended that the department cut back on its Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, which was formed to develop ways to reprocess spent nuclear fuel. The council said the partnership has not been adequately peer reviewed and is banking on reprocessing technology that hasn't been proven, or isn't expected to be ready in the time the Bush administration envisions.

The report said GNEP research is taking money and focus away from other nuclear research programs and efforts to speed the construction of new nuclear power plants.

"All committee members agree that the GNEP program should not go forward and that it should be replaced by a less aggressive research program," said the panel. It said if the administration proceeds as planned, there will be "significant technical and financial risks."

Bush announced the global nuclear initiative in early 2006 and has repeatedly touted it as key to U.S. efforts to deal with a growing amount of highly radioactive reactor waste and still allow a large expansion of commercial nuclear power. Internationally, the plan envisions a small number of nations including the United States and Russia supplying other nations with reactor fuel and reprocessing their used fuel.

The Academy panel said it did not address the pros and cons of the international aspects of the GNEP program but expressed deep reservations about its ability to address the U.S. waste disposal issue.

The GNEP program has been criticized by nuclear nonproliferation activists and has received a chilly reception in Congress, which has refused to provide the short-term funding the Energy Department has requested. The administration wanted nearly \$395 million for the program this year, but is getting \$167 million.

Although nuclear fuel reprocessing continues in Europe and Japan, the United States abandoned it in the 1970s because of concerns that the stream of pure plutonium that is created poses a nuclear proliferation risk. But the GNEP program envisions adopting a different reprocessing method that its advocates argue would not create pure plutonium.

The Academy panel of scientists said that "significant technical problems remain to be solved" in development of the new approach, known as the "UREX" process.

This program "should not go forward," and it should be replaced by a less aggressive research program, the council's report adds.

Academy scientists reasoned that domestic waste management, security and the need for nuclear fuel are not adequate to justify commercial-scale reprocessing facilities, "and there is no economic justification to proceed."

Last month, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. said that no nuclear plant should be built in Utah until the plant could reprocess its waste on site.

"That's a deal-breaker," the governor said in an interview. During his monthly press conference in October on KUED Channel 7, he reiterated that the storage issue needs to be resolved before Utahns would feel comfortable with nuclear power.

Tilton said the governor's position, plus any reduction in recycling research and development, do not pose any problems for Transition Power Development.

"The issue of having reprocessing is second, and incidental, to generating power," he said.

"Eventually, we'll have reprocessing."

If a nuclear plant were to come on-line, there would not be any spent fuel to reprocess for 30

or 40 years, he said. Meanwhile, Transition Power's plant would be constructed with facilities to store spent fuel rods for 100 years.

The plant may not finish its regulatory reviews for at least five years, with construction taking place later. At the earliest, the plant could be operating in 10 years, but 15 years may be a more realistic guess, he said.

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