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Herbert opens discussion on nuclear power

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Gov. Gary Herbert said Utah is late to the discussion on whether to turn to nuclear power and shouldn't be afraid of the debate.

"I don't know all the answers to the questions because we haven't had the questions really in discussion and debate, and we really need to," Herbert said during his monthly KUED news conference Thursday. "Over 30 states are already engaged in nuclear power production in some form or fashion, and if we're serious about having affordable energy and cleaner air and cleaner energy production, nuclear power has got to be something to discuss.

"We're entering the game a little late here," Herbert said.

He called for the debate on nuclear power during his State of the State address Wednesday night, a prominent platform for an issue that the governor has said he is open to since taking office.

A draft of the governor's 10-year energy blueprint, due to be finalized soon, says nuclear power is worth consideration, but it isn't a realistic option within the next decade. The report said the feasibility of nuclear power in the state will depend on water, waste disposal, transmission and the economics of new power plants.

"The governor was already advised by experts from his energy initiative that nuclear is an impractical choice for Utah," said Christopher Thomas, executive director of the Healthy Environment Alliance of Utah. "The draft report downplayed nuclear, while recommending expansion of renewable energy and energy efficiency as near-term solutions. What happened?"

But Rep. Mike Noel, R-Kanab, chairman of the House Public Utilities and Technology Committee, said he was thrilled to hear that the governor was putting nuclear power into play.

"I loved it. Fantastic," he said.

Noel said he thinks the Legislature has already cleared a path for nuclear power in the state. In 2009, lawmakers designated nuclear power as a renewable energy, qualifying it for state tax breaks.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Jenkins, R-Plain City, said Senate Republicans are enthusiastic supporters of nuclear power, and he endorses Herbert's challenge to consider nuclear power as an option.

"That's our future," Jenkins said after the governor's speech Wednesday. "It's going to have to be nuclear if it's not fossil fuel."

Herbert said he sees the state's role as one of collaborator, helping to ensure there aren't undue obstacles in the licensing process.

"I don't think the state is going to start proposing a nuclear power plant. We're not going to construct and run one," he said. "[But] we have a role to play, and we'll play that role well."

One company, Transition Power Development, led by former state Rep. Aaron Tilton, is in the lengthy process of applying for a license to operate a pair of nuclear power plants in Emery County.

Noel, who is executive director of the Kane County Water Conservancy District, which has agreed to lease water to Transition Power, said water remains the biggest hang-up with the project — as well as ensuring flows to sustain endangered species in the Colorado River.

"It's kind of a balancing act. What's more important, inexpensive power, nonpolluting power ... or the water?" he asked.

For years, Utah fought a plan to build a temporary storage site for spent nuclear fuel on the Skull Valley Goshute Indian Reservation in Utah's western desert. But Herbert said he thinks the state would be less adamantly opposed to storing waste from power generated in state.

"The question is going to be, if we produce nuclear power in Utah, is that power going to be used by Utah? And, if it is, it's probably more acceptable to keep the spent [fuel] rods here in Utah," Herbert said.