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## **Chu: Nuclear must be part of energy mix**

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Energy Secretary Steven Chu sought Wednesday to assure skeptical senators that the Obama administration supports continued development of nuclear energy, even as it backs away from building a nuclear waste dump in Nevada.

"Nuclear is going to be part of our energy future. It has to be," Chu told members of the Senate Budget Committee at a hearing in which a half dozen senators, Republicans and Democrats, raised concerns about the administration's support for nuclear power.

Each time Chu gave a similar assurance, even as he reiterated that the administration has every intention of pulling the plug on a proposed nuclear waste site at Yucca Mountain.

"You can see the reason for some of the skepticism," Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., told Chu.

"I don't want to save Yucca. I accept the fact that may not be viable," said Sen. Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, the committee's ranking Republican. However, he said he was concerned about the administration's degree of support for building new reactors.

Chu said he is ready to act on loan guarantees for the first group of new reactors and plans on "moving very aggressively to getting the money out the door." Congress in 2005 authorized \$18.5 billion in loan guarantees for new reactors, but none of the applications has yet to be approved.

Still, Chu said the administration is determined to move in a new direction on how to deal with the thousands of tons of waste in the form of used reactor fuel now being kept at power plants.

Chu said the material can be kept safely "for decades" at reactor sites. And he said he hopes to have a recommendation from a special panel on alternatives to Yucca Mountain and long-term nuclear waste disposal before the end of the year. He said he will soon name members to the planned panel.

"I believe in nuclear power as a central part of our energy mix. It provides clean, baseload electricity," Chu told the hearing.

Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, nevertheless, said he was worried about "subtle signals that raise concern" about the administration's support of nuclear energy, particularly its opposition to endorsing reprocessing of nuclear waste.

"Closing the fuel cycle is something we want to do," replied Chu, referring to future reprocessing of waste so it can be recycled.

But Chu said more research is needed because current methods of reprocessing used in Japan and Europe raise concerns about nuclear proliferation because they produce pure plutonium.

Obama's proposed budget calls for eliminating funding for the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste project 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, except for money needed to respond to questions from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on a Yucca license application the Bush administration submitted last year.

Chu dismissed suggestions that the license application be withdrawn. He said the application process could provide an insight as to what the NRC will require of a future nuclear waste strategy.

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