

The Washington Post

Nuclear power regains support

TOOL AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE Even green groups see it as 'part of the answer'

Washington Post Foreign Service

By Anthony Faiola

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

LONDON -- Nuclear power -- long considered environmentally hazardous -- is emerging as perhaps the world's most unlikely weapon against climate change, with the backing of even some green activists who once campaigned against it.

It has been 13 years since the last new nuclear power plant opened in the United States. But around the world, nations under pressure to reduce the production of climate-warming gases are turning to low-emission nuclear energy as never before. The Obama administration and leading Democrats, in an effort to win greater support for climate change legislation, are eyeing federal tax incentives and loan guarantees to fund a new crop of nuclear power plants across the United States that could eventually help drive down carbon emissions.

From China to Brazil, 53 plants are now under construction worldwide, with Poland, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia seeking to build their first reactors, according to global watchdog groups and industry associations. The number of plants being built is double the total of just five years

ago.

Rather than deride the emphasis on nuclear power, some environmentalists are embracing it. Stephen Tindale typifies the shift.

When a brigade of Greenpeace activists stormed a nuclear power plant on the shores of the North Sea a few years ago, scrawling "danger" on its reactor, Tindale was their commander. Then head of the group's British office, he remembers, he stood outside the plant just east of London telling TV crews all the reasons "why nuclear power was evil."

The construction of nuclear plants was banned in Britain for years after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in what was then the Soviet Union. But now the British are weighing the idea of new nuclear plants as part of the battle against climate change, and Tindale is among several environmentalists who are backing the plan.

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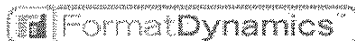
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"It really is a question about the greater evil -- nuclear waste or climate change," Tindale said. "But there is no contest anymore. Climate change is the bigger threat, and nuclear is part of the answer."

A number of roadblocks may yet stall nuclear's comeback -- in particular, its expense. Two next-generation plants under construction in Finland and France are billions of dollars over budget and seriously behind schedule, raising longer-term questions about the feasibility of new plants without major government support. Costs may be so high that energy companies find financing hard to secure even with government backing.

But experts also point to a host of improvements in nuclear technology since the Chernobyl accident and the partial meltdown of the Three Mile Island plant in Pennsylvania in 1979. Most notable is an 80 percent drop in industrial accidents at the world's 436 nuclear plants since the late 1980s, according to the World Association of Nuclear Operators.

A 'pragmatic' approach

So far at least, the start of what many are calling "a new nuclear age" is unfolding with only muted opposition -- nothing like the protests and plant invasions that helped define the green movement in the United States and Europe during the 1960s and 1970s.

As opposition recedes, even nations that had long vowed never to build another nuclear plant -- such as Sweden, Belgium and Italy -- have recently done an about-face as they see the benefits of a nearly zero-emission energy overriding the dangers of radioactive waste disposal and nuclear proliferation.

In the United States, leading environmental groups have backed climate change bills moving through Congress that envision new American nuclear plants. An Environmental Protection Agency analysis of the Waxman-Markey bill passed by the House, for instance, shows nuclear energy generation more than doubling in the United States by 2050 if the legislation is made law. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission is reviewing applications for 22 new nuclear plants from coast to coast.


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To be sure, many green groups remain opposed to nuclear energy, and some, such as Greenpeace, have refused to back U.S. climate change legislation. Groups that support the bills, such as the Sierra Club, say they are doing so because the legislation would also usher in the increased use of renewable energies like wind and solar as well as billions of dollars in investment for new technologies. They do not say they think nuclear energy is the solution in and of itself.

"Our base is as opposed to nuclear as ever," said David Hamilton, director of the Global Warming and Energy Program for the Sierra Club in Washington. "You have to recognize that nuclear is only one small part of this."

But Steve Cochran, director of the National Climate Campaign at the Environmental Defense Fund -- a group that opposed new nuclear plants in the United States as recently as 2005 -- also described a new and evolving "pragmatic" approach coming from environmental camps. "I guess you could call it 'grudging acceptance,'" he said.

"If we are really serious about dealing with climate change, we are going to have to be willing to look at a range of options and not just rule things off the table," he said. "We may not like

it, but that's the way it is."

That position, observers say, marks a significant departure. "Because of global warming, most of the big groups have become less active on their nuclear campaign, and almost all of us are taking another look at our internal policies," said Mike Childs, head of climate change issues for Friends of the Earth in Britain. "We've decided not to officially endorse it, in part because we feel the nuclear lobby is already strong enough. But we are also no longer focusing our energies on opposing it."

Some leading environmental figures, including former vice president Al Gore, remain skeptical of nuclear's promise, largely because of the high cost of building plants and the threat of proliferation, illustrated by Iran's recent attempts to blur the lines between energy production and a weapons program. Other countries seeking to build their first nuclear plants would probably purchase fuel from secure market sources in Europe and the United States,

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rather than enrich their own. And experts remain cautious about the prospect of seeing so much nuclear fuel in global circulation.

"I'm assuming the waste and safety problems get resolved, but cost and proliferation still loom as very serious problems" with nuclear energy, Gore told The Washington Post's editorial board this month. "I am not anti-nuclear, but the costs of the present generation of reactors is nearly prohibitive."

Meeting tough goals

Yet for nations such as Britain -- home of the world's first commercial nuclear plant -- a return to nuclear is seen as essential to the goal of meeting aggressive targets for reducing carbon emissions.

As reserves of natural gas from the North Sea dwindle, Britain also is betting on nuclear to help maintain a measure of energy independence.

After years of resisting new plants after the Chernobyl meltdown, the government did an initial about-face in 2007, calling for a list of possible sites for reactors. This month, British officials announced plans to fast-track construction of 10 plants. They will also push for more wind and solar energy, but those technologies are still seen by many to have limitations because of problems with transmission and scale, while "clean coal" plants are years from

commercial viability.

As may happen in the United States, the plants in Britain are expected to go up in communities with existing nuclear complexes where support for them is already high.

Tindale, 46, publicly switched his position less than a year after leaving his job as head of Greenpeace here. But his opinion began to change earlier, he said. Rather than being vilified by environmentalists, his public shift has sparked a thoughtful debate here among opponents, supporters and those on the fence.

"Like many of us, I began to slowly realize we don't have the luxury anymore of excluding nuclear energy," he said. "We need all the help we can get."

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