

Obama nixes Yucca Mountain, nuclear power.

Submitted by Reason on Wed, 2009-03-25 20:43. Public

Another crosspost from the [Science in Society](#) blog:

From the AP:

Energy Secretary Steven Chu said Thursday the proposed Yucca Mountain site in Nevada no longer is an option for storing highly radioactive nuclear waste, brushing aside criticism from several Republican lawmakers.

To date about \$13.5 billion has been spent on the project and last year the Bush administration submitted an application for a construction and operating license to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission....

Instead, Chu said the Obama administration believes the nearly 60,000 tons of waste in the form of used reactor fuel can remain at nuclear power plants while a new, comprehensive plan for waste disposal is developed.

But President Barack Obama's first budget a week ago proposes scrapping all spending on Yucca Mountain except for what is needed to answer questions from the NRC on the license application "while the administration devises a new strategy toward nuclear waste disposal."

The lack of a permanent storage site for nuclear waste has been a significant impediment to the expansion of nuclear power in the US. Despite the vague talk of other options for waste disposal, this plan means that plants will have to continue to store their waste on-site, and above ground, making the construction of new power plants very difficult. And given the amount of time and money required to prepare the Nevada site so far, it is unlikely that another solution will be forthcoming anytime soon.

While environmental advocates are usually the first to promote clean-energy subsidies, many have been lukewarm towards nuclear power. Some of this aversion is due to safety - while there are 104 nuclear power plants operating in the US currently, the specter of Three Mile Island still haunts the industry. Some of it is cultural, feeding off an aversion towards the "unnatural" in the environmental movement.

Yet of the various zero-emissions energy sources, nuclear power has been the most significant success, generating 80% of the electricity used by France. (The only alternative energy that comes close is hydrothermal, which generates a similar proportion of Iceland's energy. But Iceland has both a smaller population and extraordinarily favorable geography for power generation.) Because of this success, some within the environmental movement have been pushing for increased nuclear power as the best option to combat CO2 emissions.

But, like the majority of the environmental movement, Obama has a record of being less than wholehearted in supporting nuclear power, even as he pushes for subsidizing less quantitatively promising - but politically safer - sources of alternative energy. The safety problem with nuclear power is a real and significant challenge, but by piling up waste at over a hundred discrete sites, this move will likely only exacerbate the problem in the short to medium run. In the long run the risk may decrease, if only because nuclear power generation will stop altogether as old plants are shut down.

The cynic in me must note that the Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid, is from...you guessed it, Nevada.

Trackback URL for this post:

<http://distributedrepublic.net/trackback/11333>

» Reason's blog