

Nuclear power ecologically crucial: US

Even Australia sees the light

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NUCLEAR power is critical to tackling global air pollution and climate change, the US and Australia have warned as they prepare to unveil a multi-million-dollar investment in clean energy technology.

The Asia-Pacific Clean Development and Climate Partnership, which held its inaugural meeting in Sydney yesterday, will today announce eight new taskforces embracing the member nations of China, India, Japan, South Korea, the US and Australia.

US officials will also unveil a significant investment to match Australia's expected \$100million commitment to a new fund that will be used to establish industry and government working groups on energy and climate issues.

One working group on "hybrid renewables" in the region will work towards linking solar, wind and hydro power. "Imagine bringing together in one project solar energy by day, wind at night and potentially linking it to hydro power," Environment Minister Ian Campbell told The Australian last night.

"We've got some of the greatest minds from the biggest companies in the world ... If they don't do it, no one will."

But the call to embrace nuclear power came with a warning from the US that Australia must ensure appropriate safeguards are in place if it pursues plans to sell Australian uranium to China.

"We don't object to that," US secretary of Energy Sam Bodman said of the proposal being negotiated between Australia and China. "But we would encourage both the Australians as well as the Chinese to make sure there are adequate safeguards in place.

"The potential after 9/11 in our country, the threat of terrorists, is something we are taking very seriously and there is concern over the potential access of terrorists to nuclear material."

The talks brought together high-profile industry and government delegates from the six nations, with a view to encouraging the adoption of cleaner methods of generating power, such as renewable energy.

Jim Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council of Environmental Quality, said nuclear energy was critical to developing cleaner energy sources.

"You are not serious about cutting the harmful effects of air pollution and tackling climate change unless you have a serious discussion about the future of nuclear," he told The Australian.

Australia mines and exports uranium but, unlike many nations, does not use it to generate power, despite a growing debate on the merits of nuclear energy.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Industry and Resources Minister Ian Macfarlane backed the US push to debate the use of nuclear power.

Mr Downer also confirmed work had begun to hold talks with China about safeguards for the potential sale of uranium. "Nuclear power is greenhouse-friendly and that needs to be taken into account," he said.

The Australian has also confirmed that Chinese officials visited Australia in 2004 to negotiate the possible purchase of the Honeymoon uranium mine in South Australia.

Leigh Curyer, chief financial officer for Southern Cross Resources, which owns the Honeymoon mine, confirmed "intermittent discussions" were continuing. "The Chinese are still interested in investing in the mine, not buying it outright," Mr Curyer said. Mr Macfarlane said Australia would only supply uranium to nations that had stringent safeguards and weapons non-proliferation agreements.

Speaking on the sidelines of the talks, Mr Downer yesterday condemned Iran's latest steps to resume nuclear research.

"We see no need for Iran to undertake this research," he said.

"Australia will be consulting closely with colleagues on the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) board of governors to determine the next diplomatic steps, including whether a special IAEA board meeting should be convened to report Iran to the UN Security Council."

State and territory governments questioned the value of the Asia-Pacific Clean Development and Climate Partnership.

NSW Environment Minister Bob Debus said targets were needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, while Victorian Environment Minister John Thwaites said industry would only embrace new technologies if market incentives were offered.