

US budget calls for building of new nuclear plants

Great news but be wary of the time this takes. The anti-viruses are still out there.!

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The US Energy department on Monday proposed a broad-based nuclear plan designed to meet burgeoning domestic and world energy needs by encouraging the construction of new nuclear power plants in the US for the first time in a generation, and setting up an international programme for the exchange of nuclear fuel.

The initiative, called the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP), would seek a partnership with other established nuclear countries such as the UK, France, Russia, China and Japan to export nuclear fuel waste to developing countries and encourage them to use so-called fast reactors that burn plutonium and other byproducts from conventional reactors. The US and other countries would then dispose of the final waste, reducing the overall waste burden and preventing these countries from acquiring weapons-grade nuclear material.

Clay Sell, US deputy secretary of energy, said he had traveled two weeks ago to different capitals from London to Beijing consulting with foreign officials and nuclear experts on the proposed programme, and said the response had been positive.

“The reason we think this can work from a non-proliferation standpoint is that we are seeking to provide commercially attractive incentives for countries to lease fuel rather than make investments in their own fuel cycle,” said Mr Sell.

He said that the GNEP proposal represents a “nuclear renaissance” that is crucial to meeting the world’s growing energy demand, which is expected to double by 2050, as well as diminishing the overall amount of nuclear waste.

The energy department announced the US \$250m GNEP initiative as part of President George W. Bush’s Advanced Energy Initiative and included it in the administration’s 2007 budget proposal released on Monday.

The department of energy’s overall proposed 2007 budget remains fixed at US \$23.6bn from 2006, but the department is requesting a US \$500 million increase in science funding for Mr Bush’s American Competitiveness Initiative.

The department is also proposing significant increases in funding for alternative energy sources such as biomass and solar energy that were highlighted in the president’s State of the Union pledge to end America’s “addiction to oil.” But overall spending on energy efficiency and alternative energy would rise by just 0.2 per cent under the proposal, which calls for eliminating funding for development of hydropower, geothermal technologies and would cut funding for new vehicle technologies.

“This focus is meant to emphasise the crucial role that this department plays in the research and development efforts of this nation,” said US secretary of energy Samuel W. Bodman.

The GNEP seeks to harness new technology that can reprocess nuclear fuel without separating plutonium – technology that was not available when the US stopped reprocessing fuel over 35 years ago due to proliferation fears. The new reactor

technology diminishes the threat that the transferred fuel could be used for nuclear weaponry, advocates say. The recipient of the fuel would then use Advanced Burner Reactors, or “fast reactors” capable of burning down the spent fuel for power, and then return it to its country of origin.

But critics say that “fast reactors” have proved unreliable, and that the programme would in fact make the US and its allies far less safe by making it easier for countries like Iran and North Korea to acquire nuclear fuel.

“There are two proliferation concerns that you need to worry about -- one is terrorists manufacturing weapons from stolen material, and the other is a state like Iran or North Korea using the technology and diverting the technology and or the material for state weapons,” said Thomas B. Cochran, director of the nuclear programme at the Natural Resources Defense Council, a Washington DC based environmental advocacy organisation.

Mr Cochran also says the current world nuclear regulatory regime, the International Atomic Energy Agency, allows for any country to pursue peaceful nuclear programmes, and that if the US goes forward with GNEP it encourages other countries to create reprocessing programmes and perhaps send reprocessed fuel to unfriendly nations.

“Today it’s Iran and in a decade just pick some countries that are not threats today but could be,” he warns.

The administration says it plans to work closely with the IAEA in GNEP’s implementation “to ensure that civilian nuclear facilities are used only for peaceful purposes.”

Mr Sells, the US deputy secretary of energy, also said the department expects the budget for GNEP to “go up dramatically in the next few years.”

He added: “Nuclear power is going to go on without us. We can either be a part of it or we can observe, and it’s our view and from a non-proliferation standpoint, from an economic standpoint, we are in a much stronger position to shape the future if we are part of it and we are building it.”

But Mr Cochran insisted the project was commercially unsustainable and unsafe, and predicted the GNEP would never be implemented and is little more than a waste of taxpayer money.

“Very simply, this programme that department of energy is proposing is uneconomical, it’s unreliable, it’s unsafe and it’s unworkable in the United States,” he said.