

NGOs attack EU nuclear research funding

The R&D aspect of energy policy is becoming a hot political topic as EU leaders prepare to agree on a common energy policy later this month.

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The Commission issued a 'Green Paper' that will form the basis for discussions on a common energy policy when EU leaders meet in Brussels later this month. The 'Green Paper' lists a number of options to achieve "sustainable, competitive and secure" energy supplies in the EU.

It includes a strategic energy technology plan which aims to promote a wide portfolio of low-carbon technologies, including renewable energies, clean coal, energy efficiency and next generation nuclear power stations.

Environmental NGOs have launched a campaign against what they claim is special treatment for nuclear research under the EU's forthcoming 7th framework programme for research (FP7).

The calls came ahead of a meeting of the EU Competitiveness Council, which according to a statement on 13 March reached a "large consensus" on the proposed nuclear R&D programme.

The programme focuses on fusion energy research under the international ITER programme as well as nuclear fission and radiation protection, including the management of radioactive waste. It is also part of EU attempts at creating a single European Research Area (ERA).

Positions:

The NGO criticisms focus on the specific nuclear research funding to be granted under the Euratom Treaty, one of the founding Treaties of the EU.

"The current EU Commission proposal for the FP7 is remarkable as it once again creates a special case for nuclear power. Energy as a whole is set to receive Euro 2,951 million [under the EU budget for FP7], while nuclear power is set to receive Euro 4,753 under the Euratom Programme," Friends of the Earth point out.

Foratom, the European atomic forum, says the EU will not be able to achieve its ambition of becoming a low-carbon economy without nuclear power. It says the EU's forthcoming common energy policy should make the "environmental advantages of nuclear energy loud and clear".

Support for nuclear power has gathered momentum among some European governments as concerns mount over long-term oil and gas supplies and rising energy prices. The low CO2 emission of nuclear power plants has reinforced this view as Europe struggles to meet its Kyoto emissions reduction targets. EU countries such as Finland are planning new nuclear power stations while others like Britain are considering increasing their nuclear capacity as gas and oil reserves in the North Sea erode.