

## US Looks at Nuclear Power

*Let's have the first order to break the log jam, fellows!*

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By 2020, almost one-quarter of U.S. electricity will come from nuclear power generated across the country. At least, that's the vision of some U.S. lawmakers.

Most of our 103 nuclear reactors, which account for approximately 20 percent of our electricity, were built several decades ago. But as the crunch for creative new domestic energy sources continues, lawmakers are once again looking at a source that has generated almost as much controversy as it has electricity.

At a hearing last Monday, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources heard testimony from experts who advocated a speedier push toward a nuclear-powered future.

It is 'very important for our country to move forward in a very deliberate direction' toward more nuclear energy, said Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La.

The panel was reviewing the Energy Policy Act of 2005, a bill that includes several provisions to stimulate investor interest in new U.S. nuclear plants.

It authorizes more than \$1 billion for the Energy Department to build a new nuclear reactor and provides tax credits and loan guarantees to investors interested in the nuclear power industry. These plants, lawmakers and department officials say, are the wave of the future.

The Energy Department is pursuing 'clean, abundant and affordable nuclear energy to meet not just demand for electricity, but our future needs for clean, emissions-free, efficient process heat for hydrogen production and other energy uses,' said Dennis Spurgeon, assistant secretary of the Office of Nuclear Energy Dennis Spurgeon.

Indeed, nuclear power generated close to 800,000 billion kilowatthours of electricity in 2005, according to the Energy Information Administration, the U.S. Energy Department's data arm. And, the EIA says, nuclear generation for the first two months of this year - 134,527 billion kilowatt hours - was higher than the same period last year -- 130,775 billion kilowatthours - pointing to a growth in nuclear power.

The hearing reviewed progress on the government-sponsored Next Generation Nuclear Plant, a more advanced nuclear technology that operates with a high-temperature fission reactor system. According to the 2005 legislation, the Energy Department will have a plan for this new generation of nuclear reactors by 2021, beginning with the construction of a prototype plant at the Idaho National Laboratory.

Sources of new nuclear energy are expensive. Nuclear Energy Institute spokesman Steven Kerekes priced a new plant at at least \$2 billion. He said at this point, nine companies -- including General Electric and Westinghouse Electric Company -- have expressed interest in investment in nuclear energy.

If all goes according to plan, these companies could create 19 new plants by the early 2020s. Westinghouse Vice President Regis Matzie called the next decade of development a 'nuclear renaissance.'

'Nuclear power is an essential element of America`s energy independence, energy security and clean electrical power generation,' Thomas Christopher, chief executive officer of the Maryland-based power company Areva, told the Senate committee. Areva is one of several U.S. companies investing millions in up-to-date nuclear technology.

Nuclear power is not untouched by the stigma of major accidents in the past several decades, however. Accidents at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979 and Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1984 made the technology increasingly unpopular, and most environmental groups remain staunchly opposed. Current debates over how to contain nuclear waste -- the radioactive by product of nuclear plants -- taint the resurgent interest from lawmakers and investors.

'You don't want to be creating more plutonium and spreading it around the planet when that material can come back and haunt you in the form of a nuclear weapon,' Jim Riccio, [a paid activist for the environmental group Greenpeace](#), told United Press International.

Instead, environmental activists say, Congress should encourage research on renewable solar and wind power options.