

The US pushes to build nuclear plants

The US DOE is starting to live up to its responsibilities.

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The nation's energy chief announced a plan to provide incentives to companies willing to build America's first new nuclear plants in 30 years, offering \$2 billion in federal insurance for construction of six plants.

Even before the announcement by Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman, a partnership established to build nuclear reactors in the United States has ordered the heavy steel parts needed to make a reactor vessel, as well as other crucial components, apparently the first hardware order for a plant since the 1970s. The orders were placed even though no site has been decided on.

"I think it's time for the nation that invented this technology to reassert its leadership," Bodman said. *(Ed: the US did not invent nuclear power and this kind of arrogant statement is not needed)*

The United States has 103 nuclear power plants in 31 states, but utilities have not proposed a new reactor since 1973. High costs and debate over where to store radioactive waste bogged down construction efforts, and a partial meltdown at the Three Mile Island plant in 1979 in Pennsylvania put an end to plans for new reactors.

The new order, which an executive of the partnership said was worth "tens of millions of dollars," was a major step toward construction after several years of speculation about a nuclear renaissance.

The partnership, UniStar Nuclear, made up of Constellation Energy of Baltimore and Areva, a European company, did not say where the reactor would be built. But it has previously identified as possibilities the Calvert Cliffs reactors, on the Chesapeake Bay south of Washington, D.C., and the Nine Mile Point reactors, in Scriba, N.Y., on Lake Ontario. It has said it was negotiating with other utilities that could provide sites for the reactor, called an evolutionary power reactor, or EPR. reactor, or EPR.

One piece of steel has been forged, a co-chief executive of Unistar, Michael Wallace, said, but the construction date is uncertain and the parts might be stored until needed. The company anticipates a rush of construction orders and a waiting line at the few companies equipped to make parts that weigh hundreds of tons.

One part can be made by only one company, Japan Steel Works. Some parts could be made by Le Creusot steelworks in France. *(Ed: The US lacks N-stamp suppliers.)*

"We're creating the certainty that the most critical early hardware is in hand, so we will be in position to continue to move aggressively for construction of the first EPR if everything else continues to line up correctly," Wallace said in a telephone interview.

Among the items that had to line up, he said, was the establishment by the Treasury and Energy departments of programs to distribute the aid packages that were laid out in last summer's Energy Policy Act. Those packages include loan guarantees, production tax credits and insurance against regulatory delays.

According to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, 27 possible reactors are under discussion across the country, as well as four designs that have been approved or are under review. That includes the EPR design, a derivative of the pressurized-water system built during the last round of reactor construction in the United States a generation ago. The Unistar group says its updated version will be bigger, more durable and more reliable.

Bodman said 12 utilities are expected to file papers during the next three years to build 18 reactors. The insurance plan would provide up to \$500 million in coverage for the first two plants and up to \$250 million for the next four plants.

“This program is crucial, we believe, to reinvigorating the American nuclear power industry,” Bodman told Georgia Power Co. employees during a visit to Atlanta.

Utility specialists say not all the projects are likely to be built. Gregory Jaczko, a member of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said Thursday, “I’m looking to see who is serious about building new plants by looking at who is putting money into buying components.”

Georgia Power, which provides electricity to the Atlanta area, might take up Bodman’s offer. The company is considering building a reactor at its Plant Vogtle site near Waynesboro, Ga.

“It’s a very long process. So in order to keep that option open, we are actually taking steps right now that will at least allow us to be in the running,” company spokeswoman Carol Boatwright said.

Bodman’s visit to Atlanta came at the end of a nationwide heat wave that set record temperatures and strained electrical grids.

“The industry has performed very well. The problem is, we haven’t had sufficient investment,” Bodman said. “We are the world’s biggest economy. We should not have blackouts, brownouts, rolling blackouts. That shouldn’t be in our vernacular.”

QUICK FACT

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