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OPINION

Nuclear power -- not a green option

It generates radioactive waste; it requires uranium that's dangerous to mine; it's hugely expensive.

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By Chip Ward

March 5, 2010

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Here we go again. With the Obama administration's promise of federal loan guarantees to build two new nuclear power plants at a cost of \$8.3 billion, the radioactive monster is rising from a long dormancy, pumped to life by the lobbyists for nuke designers, nuke contractors, nuke operators and nuke consultants and their generous spending.

Over the last decade, the nuclear industry has spent more than \$600 million lobbying the federal government and another \$63 million in federal campaign contributions, according to an analysis of public records by the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University. Today, the industry is using our desperate need for jobs and worries about global warming to further its cause.

But let's not forget the reasons that citizens across the nation have been successfully opposing expanded reliance on nuclear energy since the 1970s.

First and foremost, there is the waste issue. Nuclear power generates a radioactive waste stream from hell that will threaten even our grandchildren's grandchildren. We still have no repository for the waste and no plan to dispose of it. Two decades and billions of taxpayer dollars later, a proposed Yucca Mountain repository in Nevada has been all but abandoned. The taxpayer cost for resolving this currently intractable problem, if we ever do, will be massive.

There are problems at the other end of producing nuclear power too. Mining uranium is a dirty business that has left too many sick and dying miners -- and polluted communities -- in its wake. And once the uranium is mined, it has to be processed into fuel, also a hazardous and expensive undertaking.

Another factor is the price tag. Nuclear power just isn't cost-effective. It has always depended on massive taxpayer and ratepayer subsidies. Before the latest round of government loan guarantees were proposed, the so-called nuclear renaissance was just talk because private investors wouldn't bite, in part because power generated by nuclear plants

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Nuclear power -- not a green option - l...

isn't competitive: It costs 30% to 35% more than power produced from coal or natural gas plants. Delays and cost overruns are common in nuclear plant production.

And the potential for legal liability is huge. The conservative Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the National Taxpayers Union have all questioned whether it is fiscally responsible for the government to guarantee loans on nuclear power plants.

There is also the danger factor. In 2005, the National Academy of Sciences noted that "successful terrorist attacks on spent fuel pools, though difficult, are possible," and that such an attack "could result in the release of large amounts of radioactive material."

Even in the absence of terrorism, plants release radiation. The Vermont legislature is trying to kill the Vermont Yankee plant because deadly tritium has leaked into the environment. Twenty-seven of the 104 nuclear plants in the United States have been confirmed to be leaking tritium.

Lately, the advocates of nuclear power have called for expansion of their industry in order to reduce the carbon emissions that cause global warming. But nuclear power's carbon footprint is not really so low once you factor in all the other phases, such as mining and processing uranium, the construction of a massive infrastructure and waste disposal and monitoring. It's not a practical solution to reducing greenhouse gases now either, because it would take decades to build enough power plants to make a difference.

If the government is going to subsidize greener energy, wouldn't it be both wiser and more cost-effective to take the money we are giving the nuclear power industry and instead devote it to solar, wind, geothermal and conservation?

By its very nature, nuclear power requires the concentration and centralization of capital, expertise and authority, which leads to arrogant, unresponsive bureaucracies. Compared with other non-coal energy technologies, it is the most authoritarian and least democratic. Granted, large and expensive wind and solar farms will be built by big utilities, but a community could put up its own windmill, and I can put solar panels on my own house. When was the last time you and your neighbors thought about building a little nuclear power plant behind the garage?

From the promise of a "peaceful atom" through Three Mile Island and Yucca Mountain, nuclear advocates have misled the American public. And they are doing it again.

Industry spokespeople complain that regulation and litigation have driven up the costs for nuclear power. Now, in addition to the massive subsidies, the industry wants government help in fast-tracking its projects.

Let me bring the choice we are making down to earth: Say you're buying a car. The salesman has a long history of telling lies, covering up mistakes and breaking promises. He is trying to sell you a car that doesn't exist yet, so he's not sure what it will look like. It is likely to cost at least two and maybe three times what it says on the sticker. It almost certainly will take him much longer to deliver it than he says it will. The fuel for that car - let's call it a battery -- wears out constantly, is deadly dangerous and will be for thousands of years. You have to store that stuff in your basement because there's no place else for it to go. Oh, and some powerful and distant authorities will tell you when and where you can drive it. Still interested?

Whose nuclear renaissance is this?

Chip Ward is a founder of HEAL Utah and wrote about the struggle to keep his Utah backyard from becoming a nuclear dumping ground in his books, "Canaries on the Rim" and "Hope's Horizon."

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The advertisement features a red background with white and blue text. At the top, it says 'Japan On Sale' in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below that, it reads 'Fly to the unique Japanese cities via Seoul (ICN) with' in white. A small 'Excellence in Flight' logo is above the 'KOREAN AIR' logo, which is in a blue, stylized font. Underneath, it says 'Packages from' in white, followed by '\$798 + tax' in a large, blue, outlined font. A map of Japan is shown with white lines connecting it to several US cities: SEATTLE, SAN FRANCISCO, LAS VEGAS, LOS ANGELES, and SEOUL (ICN). At the bottom right, there is a 'YOKOSO! JAPAN' logo with a red sun and the text 'Visit Japan 2010'.

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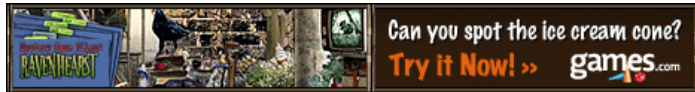
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Actually, and I say this as a decades-long opponent of nuclear power plants for a number of reasons, I think this is a good time to revisit the nuclear option, but not the one you're thinking of. Every thing said in this article is true, but there is, or seems to be, a fairly green option: thorium. It's safer (plants can't pull a Chernobyl or TMI), it doesn't contribute to the manufacture of nuclear weapons, and the waste is both considerably less in volume, toxicity and durability. I wouldn't object to a thorium-fueled plant being built on my block, never mind my state. As for conventional nukes-- that's a closed door in Maine: we outlawed new (uranium-fueled) nuclear plants in the state years ago. The thorium option, however, would appeal to our sensibilities.

FarmerTomTwo (03/05/2010, 6:13 AM)

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I totally agree with you, as they say nuke plants are clean energy sources, I would like to know if data is available on the carbon footprint that has been mentioned in this article.

Rupali78 (03/05/2010, 2:01 AM)

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