Whither GNEP, Yucca Mountain, and Other Nuclear Programs

As I write this in late November, we have learned only a little about the direction that U.S. President-elect Barack Obama plans to take the country. We suspect that most of his energies and attention will be directed to the world’s current dismal financial situation. But other issues, including health care, global warming, and energy policy, will be on the table as well, and at this point, we can only speculate on what actions will be taken on these issues. But I picked up a few tidbits of information at the recent American Nuclear Society Winter Meeting in Reno that might give our speculations a little credibility.

- **GNEP.** President Bush’s Global Nuclear Energy Partnership program, launched a few years ago as a program to reduce the risk of nuclear proliferation while bringing the benefits of nuclear power to developing nations, and to develop fuel recycling facilities and advanced burner reactors (among other things), may be a program that does not survive the next few years. In 2007, the National Academy of Sciences reviewed the ambitious goals of the GNEP program, including its recycling and advanced reactor schemes, and urged the program to slow down. An Obama administration may elect to slow down the program to a crawl, or even slow it to a halt. As noted in a session on the advanced fuel cycle at the ANS Meeting, already the House of Representatives, in its language on the fiscal 2009 budget, has directed the U.S. Department of Energy not to continue pursuing design and construction on any fuel cycle facilities, and while the program has been operating on a Continuing Resolution (and not a voted budget) since October, it is abiding by the House wording and focusing exclusively on research and development. Funding for the program has been cut in half. So GNEP is already slowing down, even before the new administration takes office in January. In addition, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has “unbundled” its licensing approach for a potential reprocessing plant from the GNEP program, noting that it has received letters from the nuclear industry expressing interest in building a reprocessing plant, outside the concept of the GNEP program.

- **Yucca Mountain.** President-elect Obama campaigned on a policy of, shall we say, “non-endorsement” of the Yucca Mountain Project (the country’s high-level waste and spent fuel repository project). Early in the campaign, he baldly stated that he felt that “there are still significant questions about whether nuclear waste can be safely stored there” and therefore he could not support the project. He did state, however, that the country should continue looking for a safe, long-term disposal solution based on “sound science.”

- **Water.** One speaker at the ANS Meeting mentioned water as the next big issue facing nuclear power plants, and noted that he would not be surprised if in 10–15 years, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission ordered those plants that rely on water cooling to backfit cooling towers into the plants. If that happens, would that mean another spate of commercial plant decommissionings, should utilities decide that the expense to comply is greater than the value of the plants? Admittedly, that’s looking at a longer horizon than the next four years (President-elect Obama’s first term of office), but it’s still a good topic for speculation.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor

Gleanings from the ANS Winter Meeting in Reno and Other Sources

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