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New Nuclear Plants and Old Radioactive Waste

For years and years and years, we heard the mantra of "No new nuclear plants before we solve the nuclear waste problem." At first, it was just the anti-nuclear crowd who insisted that this phrase was Gospel from the Word of the Grand Waste Manager in the Sky or something. But pretty soon, the nuclear industry and national governments fell under the spell of the mantra, until we all began to believe that, truly, we could not even *think* about building any new nuclear plants until all the nuclear waste everywhere in the world was safely disposed of *somewhere.* Even Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, in his final speech before leaving the Energy Department in January, in which he called for the expansion of nuclear power, added a cautionary note with: "even the most ardent supporter of nuclear power understands that we must move forward in dealing with spent nuclear fuel."

So, thank goodness for the United Kingdom House of Lords' Select Committee on Science and Technology, which in a December report stated baldly (and boldly) that delays in formulating long-term radwaste management strategies should not be used as a pretext for deferring decisions on the construction of new nuclear power plants. (See "Headlines," this issue, page 6.)

A major concern of the committee is that any new generating capacity would otherwise probably be supplied by "imported [natural] gas," which the report notes raises serious questions about the security of supply. This question of the supply of natural gas applies not just to the United Kingdom, but to any country around the world, even those that have a nice indigenous supply of this popular fuel. The committee also doubted that the U.K.'s target of 10 percent of generation by renewable sources by 2010 and 20 percent by 2020 could be met.

If you take away natural gas and renewables, and yet if you want to reduce carbon dioxide emissions (as the United Kingdom and many other developed countries have pledged to do), you don't have many sources left for power generation. What you have, actually, is nuclear.

In the United States today, many utility/vendor consortia or partnerships have been established to pursue early site permits and combined construction/operating licenses for new nuclear power plants. Some U.S. utility personnel are almost willing to be quoted that a new nuclear plant (not necessarily built by their utility, but by *some* utility somewhere) will be coming on line in the 2015 time frame (or, about 10 years from now).

In years past, a utility spokesperson would have couched such a positive statement by adding something to the effect that, "assuming the Yucca Mountain repository opens on time." Lately, however, people are realizing that power needs will not wait for a repository. Power needs are here, today, now. A repository is still years away, what with the licensing process still ahead and who knows how many court cases to be resolved after that. Even an interim supply solution (the Private Fuel Storage LLC venture) is still waiting on licensing and court case resolution.

So, it's time we formally abandon the "waste not, plant not" position surrounding new plant construction. If you want to generate a great deal of power in an environmentally friendly way, your choices are pretty minimal. Nuclear power is just about all there is. Holding back the benefits of adequate power supplies because a few steps are pending in a waste disposal program punishes the innocent (those who need emissions-free power supplies) without any negative impact on the guilty (we won't define any guilty parties here—you probably know who they are).

Don't get me wrong. Like Secretary Abraham, I think the United States absolutely *needs* to keep moving on the Yucca Mountain project, just as it needs to solve the problems of access to low-level waste disposal sites, cleanup of former weapons sites, and other nuclear waste issues we face. But this country also needs to move ahead on supplying emission-free power, and, as the House of Lords' committee states, we should not tie new power and waste issues together. After all, we keep saying that nuclear waste problems are *political* problems, not *technical* problems. And by now we should know that solving political problems usually takes a lot longer than anyone could ever have predicted.—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor*

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