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Obama's New Nuke Plant Plans Stir Old Fears Over Waste Storage

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President Obama is calling for \$54 billion in loan guarantees for a "new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants." His administration also announced this week that it is dropping plans for underground storage of highly radioactive nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain. The position is drawing mixed reactions from around the country, including Maine, where waste from the decommissioned Maine Yankee plant will have to stay for the indefinite future, and in the rest of New England where nuclear power already makes up about 30 percent of the region's energy supply.

There are currently five nuclear power plants operating in New England: two in Connecticut, one in Massachusetts, one in Vermont and one in New Hampshire. Second only to natural gas, nuclear power is a major supplier of electricity to New England -- so much that a 2006 report found that nuclear plants could supply all residential households in the region excluding Massachusetts.

Should more nuclear plants be constructed? Paul Afonso is executive director of the New England Energy Alliance, a coalition of energy providers, business and trade organizations concerned about the region's energy supply and costs.

"I think a dialogue, led by the President in his State of the Union Address would be an important one, a dialogue to have in New England of other additional sites -- that would be an appropriate debate," Afonso says. "We understand the political constraints though, and that's why, incrementally, I think the first issue is to preserve and to recognize how important the current portfolio of nuclear energy is to our region, to our economic well being."

Afonso says a recent opinion poll of New England residents found that about half of those surveyed approve of keeping the region's current nuclear plants on line. Fueling their interest is the idea that nuclear power is "clean energy" that does not contribute to greenhouse gases and global warming.

But Ed Lyman of the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Union of Concerned Scientists says a doubling or tripling of nuclear plants would have to occur before nuclear power could significantly cut greenhouse gas emissions, and Lyman says government subsidies should not be used to get them off the ground.

"The expansion plans in the 1970s fell of their own weight because of massive cost overruns, and taxpayers and ratepayers ended up having to bail out many projects," Lyman says. "And the economics of nuclear power is no different today than it was then. The fact is that without the loan guarantees and other subsidies, there would not be a single new nuclear plant built in this country."

And then there's the thorny issue of disposing and safeguarding nuclear waste. For more than two decades the federal government has been trying to find a suitable place for a central repository for highly radioactive spent fuel that is a byproduct of nuclear power. Nevada's Yucca Mountain had been investigated and debated and rejected and finally recommended for licensing as an underground storage site.

But this week the Department of Energy moved to withdraw the application with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission after the Obama Administration eliminated funding for the site. Anti-nuclear activists cheered the move.

Patrick Dostie takes a dimmer view. "Well, what it means is that Maine Yankee down in Wiscasset now becomes sort of a defacto storage site for high level waste."

Dostie is the state's nuclear safety inspector who has seen the Maine Yankee Nuclear Power plant through its operating, decommissioning and storage phases. Before the plant shut down in 1997 because it was no longer economically viable, it was Maine's largest source of electricity. Today, Dostie says it has 60 casks of high-level spent nuclear fuel on the site as well as several that contain the cut-up guts of the internal reactor that were too radioactive to send to a low-level waste site.

Maine had hoped to safely dispose of some of this waste at Yucca beginning in the next ten years. Dostie says the delay is a reflection of the nation's political will. "It certainly puts a wrinkle in the so-called Renaissance. Obviously, you kind of always have to ask questions: Is it appropriate to build nuclear power plants when who knows how long it's going to be before we resolve the issue?"

A national blue ribbon commission has been set up to review the nation's nuclear waste disposal policies and to recommend alternatives. Dostie says he hopes that won't include revisiting a two-decades-old list of states from the 1980s that once included Maine as a possible location for a central nuclear waste repository.