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Voinovich Eyes Separate Track For 'Mini' Reactors In Talks With NRC

Senate nuclear power proponent John Voinovich (R-OH) is using his position as ranking member on the Energy and Public Works' nuclear safety subcommittee to pressure the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to expedite the certification and licensing process for so-called "mini" nuclear reactors. Industry observers say the novel devices could become the first new nuclear power plants built in the U.S. in a generation, according to congressional sources.

House opposition to the Bush administration's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) program -- proposed to spur nuclear power through a closed fuel cycle -- crushed funding for a mini reactor program included in the administration's FY2009 budget, according to congressional sources. This has reportedly stoked Voinovich's interest in working with NRC to develop a plan outside of GNEP to advance the new "unconventional" reactors. NRC has said that funding hurdles and its conventional reactor licensing program gives it little leeway for developing a separate track for the mini reactors -- and hence has been resistant to the idea. But sources close to Voinovich say he would move to include separate program funding for NRC and include a line item in appropriations legislation.

The senator sees support for a mini reactor program as a boon to both energy and climate security, with nuclear energy seen as a clean source of generation under carbon regulations. The senator is reportedly also encouraged by the military's stated interest in the technology, and sees movement on certifying and licensing mini reactors as an issue of national security. The reactors fit into a Pentagon plan to increase power generation at installations to protect military facilities from power outages and a commercial power grid seen as not resilient to attacks and severe weather. Because the reactors are small, construction can be completed in a fraction of the time it would take to build a conventional nuclear power plant, industry sources say. In most cases the plants are portable, using truck or rail to deliver, and can potentially be shipped back to the vendor for refueling and waste disposal, these sources say. U.S. foundries can easily build the components needed, eliminating the need to outsource to foreign countries as is the case with most large-scale plants, they argue.

Eying these benefits, other lawmakers may be willing to examine mini nuclear power plants as an alternative to GNEP and other Bush administration programs seen as too risky to pursue. The House markup of the FY2009 Energy and Water Appropriations Bill zeroed out GNEP because "the initiative to reprocess spent nuclear fuel . . . undermines our Nation's nuclear non-proliferation policy," according to a bill summary released in late June. But the chairman of the Energy and Water Development Subcommittee, Peter Visclosky (D-IN), sees potential merit in mini reactors, even though he approved killing the GNEP program, say staffers. This could signal the potential for supporting the reactors outside a program budget, like GNEP, and include funding for the mini reactors as a separate item or "line item," these sources suggest.

But hurdles may still exist at NRC, which is receiving pressure from Congress and industry to expedite its combined Construction and Operating License (COL) program, according to congressional, industry and commission sources. NRC suggests that even with increased funding there may still be hurdles to getting the necessary staff together for a separate mini reactor design certification and licensing program. The technology the mini reactors use is described as “unconventional,” which demands special attention from staff to be brought up to speed on the processes and technologies, say NRC sources. Some mini reactor developers argue the technology is a smaller version of its larger light-water reactor cousins. But NRC says in some cases the technology is only marginally similar -- and needs a thorough vetting to bring staff up to speed on safety.

There has been increased activity at the commission in recent weeks on mini reactor design certification, and getting companies through the design certification pre-application process. The two big players on mini reactors include the Japanese conglomerate Toshiba Heavy Industries and an Oregon-based start up called NuScale Power. Both have been very active on working with NRC on the design certification, pre-application approval process. And sources close to NuScale say they have been meeting on the Hill with lawmakers to garner support, including the development of an exclusive mini power-plant licensing program.

NuScale met with NRC last month as Voinovich and nuclear safety subcommittee chairman Tom Carper (D-DE) grilled NRC Chairman Dale Klein and a complement of fellow commissioners at a hearing on the licensing process, in which the mini reactor issue was discussed. Klein refused to pursue a separate track, saying the commission could not divert resources to devise an exclusive process with staffing shortfalls and the threat of a continuing resolution and a flat budget into next year. The hearing sparked Voinovich to pursue private discussions with the NRC, say congressional sources, and for companies like NuScale to up their lobbying, according to an industry source.

Toshiba is scheduled to meet with NRC staff sometime during the August congressional recess -- continuing a number of meetings toward eventual certification of its 4S mini power plant. NRC sources says these reactors have a long way to go through the pre-application design certification phase, before beginning the move toward licensing. Proponents contend there is demand for the 4S, with state of Alaska officials already saying they would like to deploy the Toshiba power plant.

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