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New day, new chance, for nuclear energy

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

February 16, 2010, 11:54AM

The nuclear power industry has waited 30 long years for this moment, this opportunity, to demonstrate that it can be one of the safe, clean, affordable sources of energy that helps power the United States of the future.

President Barack Obama announced Tuesday that the federal government would provide more than \$8 billion in loan guarantees to help a nuclear power developer, Southern Co., build two reactors in Georgia. If and when the plants are built, they would be the first new nuclear reactors in the United States since 1977.

Yes, Obama's embrace of nuclear power is a political outreach to congressional Republicans who have been reluctant to support the administration's energy bill. And yes, there are myriad questions raised by a rebirth of the nuclear industry: How safe are modern reactors? How and where will radioactive waste be stored? Are the huge upfront, capital costs manageable? Will taxpayers be on the hook for cost overruns?

All these are legitimate questions, but Obama is right to thrust nuclear into the mix of energy sources that the United States must exploit if it is to meet its ambitious clean energy goals. As the president said in a speech in Maryland Tuesday, "To meet our growing energy needs and prevent the worst consequences of climate change, we'll need to increase our supply of nuclear power. It's that simple."

The Northwest has a long and financially toxic history with nuclear energy -- public power ratepayers throughout the region still are paying for the failed Washington Public Power Supply (WPPS) fiasco. Moreover, Oregonians voted in 1980 to ban construction of any new nuclear power plants in the state without federally approved waste facilities.

But much of the rest of the nation and the world is rapidly moving away from Oregon's no-nuclear, no-how, no-way position. There are 56 nuclear reactors under construction around the world: 21 in China, six in South Korea, five in India. While these nations build on their nuclear industries, they are generating not just more clean energy, but more jobs, expertise, new technologies -- all of which are badly needed here.

There's important work going on in the United States, and even in Oregon, on the future of nuclear energy. NuScale Power, a Corvallis company formed to commercialize research at Oregon State University, is among those seeking to create small, safe, modular nuclear power systems.

The nation already relies on an aging nuclear energy industry far more than most Americans realize. The 104 nuclear power plants in the United States supply 20 percent of the country's electricity -- and all of it is firm, reliable and cheap energy.

It's true that the issue of waste disposal remains unresolved, and it's hard to square Obama's pro-nuclear speech Tuesday with his administration's relatively quiet announcement last week that it would shut down Yucca Mountain, the proposed repository that the government spent billions of dollars studying and preparing to use as a waste site.

Obama has formed a 15-member commission to study the future of nuclear waste storage. It may discover that glassification, encasing waste in thick glass containers, and storing them onsite is safer than the idea of creating one or more national repositories and shipping the waste in from around the country.

In any event, given what Americans now understand about climate change and energy security, it's time for a new assessment about the comparative safety and risks of energy sources. Nuclear energy now seems to pose fewer risks to the planet and human life than coal, for example. The debate has changed. Nuclear technology has changed. It's time to give the industry another chance in the United States.