

Title: U.S. falling behind in nuclear power

Desc: Article highlights Women in Nuclear conference at Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

Date: February 8, 2011

Source: Gatehouse News Service

Link: <http://www.examiner.net/mysource/business/x566175806/U-S-falling-behind-in-nuclear-power>

China has 25 nuclear power plants under construction and 50 more on the "drawing board," and the United States needs to build new reactors quicker in order to catch up with other countries, U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., said on Monday.

"We in the United States are falling behind," Blackburn said at the opening of a three-day conference called Women in Nuclear that was held at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee.

Blackburn said she supports U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander's, R-Tenn., proposal to build 100 nuclear power plants within 20 years.

"That's a great concept," said Blackburn.

During a short keynote address Monday morning, Blackburn said some politicians and critics haven't yet embraced nuclear power as an option in the nation's struggle to become energy independent and reduce emissions.

"They've looked at the downside," Blackburn said, arguing that Congress has focused on picking winners and losers in its policy battles, including in the 2007 Energy Act.

However, she said that nuclear power is a "green" technology that should be part of an "all-of-the-above" energy policy, including clean coal as well as hydroelectric, solar and wind power. She said there is bipartisan support in Congress for that approach.

"We feel like it's going to take a little bit of everything to be energy independent," remarked Blackburn, a member of the House's Energy and Commerce Committee.

Spent fuels

Blackburn recommended federal officials speed up the permitting process for nuclear reactors, offer alternative financing mechanisms like loan guarantees and resolve the issue of what to do with spent fuel.

"All of these steps are part of a cultural shift," she said. "We're going to have to move past some of the parochial bickering that takes place in Washington, D.C."

The congresswoman suggested federal officials offer incentives for innovations, stating "it would bring more concepts into the marketplace."

Oak Ridge National Laboratory Director Thom Mason said spent fuel programs could reduce the volume and lifetime of nuclear reactor waste, and they also extract more energy.

He said a blue-ribbon commission will soon issue a report regarding those fuels, and resolving that issue could remove one of the industry's uncertainties.

President Barack Obama has "made clear" that the waste cannot be stored at a proposed high-level nuclear waste repository in Yucca Mountain, Nev., according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

DOE filed a motion in March 2010 to withdraw the license application for that controversial site, which has been under study for years.

"While DOE reaffirms its obligation to take possession and dispose of the nation's spent nuclear fuel and high-level nuclear waste, the Secretary of Energy has decided that a geologic repository at Yucca Mountain is not a workable option for long-term disposition of these materials," stated DOE's withdrawal motion that was filed with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The wastes have been stored at temporary locations across the country.

Obama directed Energy Secretary Steven Chu to establish the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future, which will provide recommendations for developing a safe, long-term solution to managing the country's used nuclear fuel and nuclear waste.

On Monday, Blackburn cited Yucca Mountain as a safe place to dispose of waste.

Mason said federal officials were going to have to re-study Yucca Mountain, anyway, as the lifetimes of the nation's 104 nuclear reactors are extended and new reactors are built.

Small reactors

Also during her keynote address Monday, Blackburn praised the concept of small modular reactors.

Each of the modular reactors could produce 125 megawatts of electricity, or about 10 percent as much as conventional reactors. One reactor would generate more than enough electricity to power ORNL.

Mason said the small reactors would not replace traditional reactors. He said the challenge now is to get the first one licensed and built.