

Pros, cons of nuclear power debated

Panel probes energy issues and plans to build Utah reactors

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Deseret Morning News

Published: November 3, 2007

About 200 people were reminded Friday night how things such as energy-hungry plasma screen televisions and super-size houses are impacting the debate about what role nuclear power should play in exploring alternative energy sources aimed at reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

Arjun Makhijani, one of five panelists leading a broad discussion about nuclear energy, said people can start answering the nuclear questions by changing their values in terms of where they get their energy and how they use it. He suggested focusing more on renewable energy sources such as wind and solar.

"What I'm telling you is we can do it," said Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research. "I know that technologically it can be done."

Audience members inside the Pickle Gallery in Salt Lake City were asked to consider the issue of energy use on many levels, including how to handle nuclear waste and its long-term impact on the environment.

Makhijani said people don't know how to ask the right questions when it comes to figuring out how best to store the waste or where to bury it. Panelist and University of Utah engineering professor Kent Udell disagreed, saying the correct question to ask is whether it's morally right to leave untold amounts of nuclear waste for future generations to deal with.

As the Utah Legislature deals with a proposal to build at least two nuclear power plants in the state, Udell, who also teaches on the subject of sustainable energy, said the state's dry climate and uncertain water supply should be considered. That's where the proposal for some inside the gallery raised a few eyebrows.

Vanessa Pierce, director of Healthy Environment Alliance (HEAL) Utah, noted how the business relationships of two state lawmakers are intertwined in the proposal.

Rep. Aaron Tilton, R-Springville, owns Transition Power Development, a private equity group that has signed an agreement to secure water rights to cool the nuclear fuel rods for the proposed plants. The water would come from the Kane County Water Conservancy District, whose executive director is Rep. Mike Noel, R-Kanab.

Noel is also chairman of the Legislature's Public Utilities and Technology Committee and Tilton is vice chairman of that committee. Both lawmakers are members of the state's Public Utilities and Technology Interim Committee, which Noel co-chairs.

As outsiders observe potential conflicts of interest on the part of both lawmakers, Pierce pointed out that building nuclear reactors here would "undermine" recent successful efforts to keep nuclear waste generated outside the state from being stored here.

But then there's still the lure of what nuclear power can do for air quality and climate change.

Former Nuclear Regulatory Commissioner Peter Bradford said a nuclear reactor is less polluting to the atmosphere than a coal-fired power plant. The sobering reality, he noted, would be that to make an impact on slowing global warming, the world would need to double its nuclear capacity in the next 20 years — and that raised the question of what to do about countries that would also use the technology to build nuclear weapons.

Bradford noted that just five years ago, people weren't talking about building more costly nuclear reactors, but climate change has forced the issue.

For panelist Sarah Wright, director of Utah Clean Energy, the subject of global warming has caused her to look inside individual homes for answers. She said home sizes keep increasing while consumers are buying big power users such as plasma screen televisions, which she said use about as much energy as refrigerators.

"We all make individual choices," Wright said. "We just need to start using more efficient technologies."

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