

September 2, 2009

The chair of the public consultation process on the Future of Uranium in Saskatchewan, Dan Perrins, says he expects to present his findings to the provincial government in the next couple of weeks (by September 14). This is sure to set off the next round of Nuclear debates.

The Prairie Policy Centre has been studying our energy options for some time, and is on record as favouring nuclear power as long as it is economically feasible. But, before we start building nuclear power plants across the prairies, Saskatchewan needs a comprehensive energy strategy that addresses all of its energy needs and potentials. Among those potentials is the opportunity to take a leadership role in the research and development of new energy technologies. But, alas, the gathering nuclear storm will again put the proverbial cart before the horse, and the debate will be centered on the cost of building nuclear power plants.

Despite what many of us might like to think, the nuclear debate is not unique to Saskatchewan. Nor are we alone in the quest for good information about all forms of energy that are safe and sustainable. It's not for the Prairie Centre to decide what form of energy is best. Our job is to provide good information.

The following commentary comes from the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC, so it is an American perspective that sees emerging nuclear technologies as an opportunity rather than a problem. Could this apply to Saskatchewan?

Let the Nuclear Race Begin

By Nick Loris, June 12, 2009

No, we're not reverting back to Cold War. We're talking commercial nuclear energy. And we're talking commercial competition—what will ultimately be the life-blood of the nuclear renaissance. Up until now, big light-water reactors have largely dominated the nuclear industry. 104 of them operate safely in the U.S. today and provide Americans with 20% of their electricity, but they represent just one technology. The exciting thing about nuclear power is not what it gives us today, but what its potential is for the future.

And our latest view into the future came just yesterday when The Babcock & Wilcox Company (B&W), a leader in nuclear technologies for decades, announced:

“plans to deploy a North American-manufactured, scalable nuclear reactor using its unique history of more than 50 years of continuous reactor engineering and manufacturing. The [B&W mPower reactor design](#) is a passively safe Advanced Light Water Reactor (ALWR) with a below-ground containment structure. This optimized ALWR represents true Generation III++ nuclear technology that B&W believes can be certified, manufactured and operated within today's existing U.S. regulatory, industrial supply chain and utility operational infrastructure.”

One of the most interesting things about B&W's entrance into the reactor market is that unlike most other designers, they have the industrial infrastructure to start building these things right now. And what's more, this is a company that builds reactors today, multiple reactors each year, that the U.S. government uses for national security purposes. No one else has that on their resume.

And they are just the latest to bring a new reactor design to the table.

Consider that just in the last few years we've seen [Hyperion](#) Power Generation, Inc. introduce its plan to commercialize small, nuclear reactors for remote locations as soon as 2013. The reactors, developed at the [Los Alamos National Laboratory](#), one of the nation's leading nuclear laboratories, are very small and buried underground. Toshiba has been working on a 20 feet by 6 feet reactor [called the 4S](#) that would produce electricity at about half the price of regular grid electricity. They could become commercially viable in Japan very soon, and Toshiba hopes to expand to Europe and the U.S. within the next few years. Indeed, the town of Galena, Alaska has passed a resolution calling for the [deployment](#) of a 4S to bring affordable power to their remote location. A company called [NuScale](#) Power, Inc. is also commercializing a modular, 45MW nuclear power plant. What we see emerging here is competition, and it's a good thing.

It is a perfect example of why government can't pick winners and losers among energy sources. Government subsidization of some technologies inevitably crowds out investment and innovation for others. Government interference in the marketplace causes a misallocation of resources away from where they could be most efficiently used. So instead of subsidizing certain technologies at the expense of others, the federal government should provide an efficient and predictable regulatory and political environment and allow all energy technologies to compete.

The race has begun. If government gets out of the way, American consumers will be the winner.

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