



7. NUCLEAR ENERGY: Senators float bill to promote modular reactors (03/09/2011)

Hannah M. Northey, E&E reporter

A bipartisan group of key senators yesterday introduced legislation to spur the development of modular nuclear reactors.

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), ranking member Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) and Sen. Mark Udall (D-Colo.) offered the measure to establish a program to license modular nuclear units by 2021.

The legislation would direct the secretary of Energy to create a private-public partnership to develop a standard design for two reactors with a capacity under 300 megawatts, and one reactor with a maximum rated capacity of 50 megawatts. The designs would need to be certified by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission by 2018 and receive a combined operating license by 2021.

The legislation also requires the Energy Department to obtain an early site permit for two sites for the reactors.

"I believe that it is appropriate for the Energy Department to work with utilities on the design and approval process for these reactors because nuclear power will play an important role in a carbon-constrained energy world," said Bingaman, who is retiring at the end of this Congress.

The three senators introduced an identical stand-alone bill in 2009 (*E&E Daily*, Dec. 14, 2009). But the measure stalled after reaching the Senate Energy panel because the "111th Congress did nothing on energy," said Bingaman spokesman Bill Wicker.

Udall said nuclear energy is one of the "few low-carbon, large-scale sources of baseload power that we know how to build today -- and small reactors have the potential to make nuclear power more cost-efficient and secure," he said. The bill will help get that technology to market, he added.

The senators are championing the reactors as less capital-intensive than larger 1,000-megawatt reactors NRC is currently licensing and say the technology could be built in phases, unlike current plants. Although no firm designs have materialized for mass production in the United States, nuclear modular reactors could potentially be built in factories and transported to different locations.

Under the bill, developers chosen to join the partnership would be selected under a competitive merit review process.

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