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U.S. Nuclear Industry Faces New Uncertainty

By **JOHN M. BRODER**

WASHINGTON — The fragile bipartisan consensus that nuclear power offers a big piece of the answer to America's energy and [global warming](#) challenges may have evaporated as quickly as confidence in [Japan's](#) crippled nuclear reactors.

Until this weekend, [President Obama](#), mainstream environmental groups and large numbers of Republicans and Democrats in Congress agreed that nuclear power offered a steady energy source and part of the solution to climate change, even as they disagreed on virtually every other aspect of energy policy. Mr. Obama is seeking tens of billions of dollars in government insurance for new nuclear construction, and the nuclear industry in the United States, all but paralyzed for decades after the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, was poised for a comeback.

Now, that is all in question as the world watches the unfolding crisis in Japan's nuclear reactors and the widespread terror it has spawned.

"I think it calls on us here in the U.S., naturally, not to stop building nuclear power plants but to put the brakes on right now until we understand the ramifications of what's happened in Japan," Senator [Joseph I. Lieberman](#), independent of Connecticut and one of the Senate's leading voices on energy, said on [CBS's](#) "Face the Nation."

Nuclear power, which still suffers from huge economic uncertainties and local concerns about safety, had been growing in acceptance as what appeared to many to be a relatively benign, proven and (if safe and permanent storage for wastes could be arranged) nonpolluting source of energy for the United States' future growth.

But even staunch supporters of nuclear power are now advocating a pause in licensing and building new reactors in the United States to make sure that proper safety and evacuation measures are in place. Environmental groups are reassessing their willingness to see nuclear power as a linchpin of any future [climate change legislation](#). Mr. Obama still sees nuclear

power as a major element of future American energy policy, but he is injecting a new tone of caution into his endorsement.

“The president believes that meeting our energy needs means relying on a diverse set of energy sources that includes renewables like wind and solar, natural gas, clean coal and nuclear power,” said Clark Stevens, a White House spokesman. “Information is still coming in about the events unfolding in Japan, but the administration is committed to learning from them and ensuring that **nuclear energy** is produced safely and responsibly here in the U.S.”

Three of the world’s chief sources of large-scale energy production — coal, **oil** and nuclear power — have all experienced eye-popping accidents in just the past year. The Upper Big Branch coal mine explosion in West Virginia, the Deepwater Horizon blowout and **oil spill** in the Gulf of Mexico and the unfolding nuclear crisis in Japan have dramatized the dangers of conventional power generation at a time when the world has no workable alternatives able to operate at sufficient scale.

The policy implications for the United States are vexing. “It’s not possible to achieve a climate solution based on existing technology without a significant reliance on nuclear power,” said **Jason Grumet**, president of the **Bipartisan Policy Center** in Washington and an energy and climate change adviser to the 2008 Obama campaign. “It’s early to reach many conclusions about what happened in Japan and the relevance of what happened to the United States. But the safety of nuclear power will certainly be high on the list of questions for the next several months.”

“The world is fundamentally a set of relative risks,” Mr. Grumet added, noting the confluence of disasters in coal mining, oil drilling and nuclear plant operations. “The accident certainly has diminished what had been a growing impetus in the environmental community to support nuclear power as part of a broad bargain on energy and climate policy.”

Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Senate Republican leader, said that the United States should not overreact to the Japanese nuclear crisis by clamping down on the domestic industry indefinitely. Republicans have loudly complained that the Obama administration did just that after the **BP** oil spill last spring when it imposed a moratorium on deepwater oil drilling until new safety and environmental rules were written.

“I don’t think right after a major environmental catastrophe is a very good time to be making American domestic policy,” Mr. McConnell said on “Fox News Sunday.”

He said that the American public and politicians had recoiled after Three Mile Island, rejecting permits for the construction of dozens of nuclear plants on the “not in my backyard” impulse.

“My thought about it is, we ought not to make American and domestic policy based upon an event that happened in Japan,” Mr. McConnell said.

Mr. Obama has been as supportive of nuclear power as any recent president as he has tried to devise a political and technical strategy for ensuring energy supplies and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Nuclear power, along with expanded offshore oil drilling, “clean coal” development and extensive support for renewable energy, are part of his “all-of-the-above energy strategy,” an approach and terminology borrowed from Republicans. But his support for coal and oil as part of a grand compromise on energy were set back by last year’s mining and drilling disasters, and today’s problems with nuclear in Japan cannot help.

Concerns about earthquakes and nuclear power have been around for a long time; new questions might also be raised now about tsunamis and coastal reactors.

In Mr. Obama’s [State of the Union address](#) and in his budget, he proposed an expansion of nuclear energy technology and \$36 billion in Department of Energy loan guarantees for the construction of as many as 20 new nuclear plants.

That policy will be on the table at a hearing of the Energy and Commerce Committee on Wednesday, when [Steven Chu](#), the energy secretary, and Gregory B. Jaczko, chairman of the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#), are scheduled to testify.

“We will use that opportunity to explore what is known in the early aftermath of the damage to Japanese nuclear facilities,” said Representative Fred Upton, Republican of Michigan, the committee chairman, “as well as to reiterate our unwavering commitment to the safety of U.S. nuclear sites.”

Representative [Edward J. Markey](#), Democrat of Massachusetts and a skeptic of nuclear power who nonetheless supported expansion of nuclear power as part of the House energy and climate legislation he co-sponsored, said the United States needed tougher standards for siting and operating nuclear plants.

He said regulators should consider a moratorium on locating nuclear plants in seismically active areas, require stronger containment vessels in earthquake-prone regions and thoroughly review the 31 plants in the United States that use similar technology to the

crippled Japanese reactors. “The unfolding disaster in Japan must produce a seismic shift in how we address nuclear safety here in America,” Mr. Markey said.