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THE ENERGY CHALLENGE

Nuclear Power May Be in Early Stages of a Revival



Alexis Morin/EDF Group

A nuclear plant in Flamanville, France, being built by Areva, which says it plans to make reactor parts in Newport News, Va.

By MATTHEW L. WALD
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WASHINGTON — After three decades without starting a single new plant, the American nuclear power industry is getting ready to build again.

When the industry first said several years ago that it would resume building plants, deep skepticism greeted the claim. Not since 1973 had anybody in the United States ordered a nuclear plant that was actually built, and the obstacles to a new generation of plants seemed daunting.

But now, according to the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#), 21

companies say they will seek permission to build 34 power plants, from New York to Texas. Factories are springing up in Indiana and Louisiana to build reactor parts. Workers are clearing a site in Georgia to put in reactors. Starting in January, millions of electric customers in Florida will be billed several dollars a month to finance four new reactors.

On Thursday, the French company Areva, the world's



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largest builder of nuclear reactors, and Northrop Grumman announced an investment of more than \$360 million at a shipyard in Newport News, Va., to build components for seven proposed American reactors, and more for export.

The change of fortune has come so fast that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which had almost forgotten how to accept an application, has gone into a frenzy of hiring, bringing on hundreds of new engineers to handle the crush of applications.

Many problems could derail the so-called nuclear revival, and virtually no one believes all 34 proposed plants will be built. It is still unclear how many billions they would cost, whether the expense can be financed in a troubled credit market, and how the cost might compare with other power sources.

But experts who follow the industry expect that at least some of the 34 will be built.

Given rising public concern about [global warming](#) and a recent history of reliable operation among nuclear plants, “the climate for introducing new plants is probably the best it’s been since the industry started canceling plants” 30 years ago, said Brian Balogh, a history professor at the [University of Virginia](#). Unlike most types of power generation, nuclear plants do not emit the gases that cause global warming, once they are completed.

In the United States, orders for new reactors essentially ended in October 1973. That was also the month that the Arab oil embargo began, inaugurating an era of economic problems that drove up construction costs and suppressed demand for power. In the end, more than 100 nuclear reactors, some in advanced stages of construction, were canceled, and tens of billions of dollars were squandered.

On top of that, the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 and the Chernobyl explosion in 1986 made nuclear power a hard sell. And cheap turbines were developed to burn natural gas to generate electricity. By the 1990s, even some nuclear plants that had been running for a few years were deemed too costly and were closed.

But nuclear power never went away. The United States has 104 commercial reactors in operation, and the industry has improved their reliability markedly, increasing their output. They generate almost 20 percent of the country’s electric power.

As concerns over global warming and natural gas supplies have worsened, strong support has developed in Congress and some states for new reactors. The governor of Maryland recently cited a “moral imperative” to build plants to counter the threat of climate change. Support for new reactors has long been strong in some localities, particularly those that are candidates for billions of dollars in construction work.

And investment dollars are starting to flow.

“We have a long-term vision,” Anne Lauvergeon, chief executive of Areva, said in an interview here on Thursday, explaining her company’s decision to join forces with Northrop Grumman at Newport News.

To help spur a revival, Congress provided \$18.5 billion in loan guarantees in a 2005 energy law, plus operating subsidies similar to those available for solar and wind power, and insurance against regulatory delays.

Little effective political opposition to new reactors has emerged so far. The environmental movement is spending its energy fighting new coal-burning power plants,



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with considerable effect. While few environmental advocates are enthusiastic about

nuclear power, a handful acknowledge it could play a role in countering global warming. **INSIDE NYTIMES.COM**

“There is no question that some of the passion of the antinuclear movement has drained away,” said Professor Balogh, who is the author of a 1990 book on opposition to nuclear power.

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