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New Brunswick firms being courted by nuclear industry

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The nuclear industry is hot and Fredericton companies who want a piece of the lucrative market should be getting ready now.

That was the message from Martyn Wash, president of the Organization of Candu Industries, when he came to the capital Wednesday.

"The good news about nuclear is that right now there are about 220 new reactors proposed or on the books," he said in an interview. "Traditionally, Canada has secured about 10 per cent of the international market."

That means there's lots of high-tech, high-paying jobs available in the industry, he said.

"The message that I am giving industries here is that if you are interested, we are interested in telling you what it takes to be in our nuclear industry," he said.

Wash said his organization represents about 100 companies, most based in Ontario.

But that could change with the imminent refurbishment of the Point Lepreau nuclear plant, a second reactor on the horizon and the subsequent potential for exporting electricity. Wash was invited by Atomic Energy of Canada to pitch the market opportunities to New Brunswick companies.

He said he expects to meet with about 10 New Brunswick companies over the next few days.

Wash said a company doesn't have to be large to be involved in the nuclear industry.

"We are looking for quality of operations," he said. "We are not looking for quantity. Keep in mind there are an awful lot of components that goes into building these reactors or refurbishing them."

Wash said the industry needs small, medium and large companies.

A company must be qualified to sell to the nuclear industry, Wash said, but that process doesn't have to be expensive.

"We ask that they have a high-end quality assurance program," said Wash, which means it must have an ISO 9000-certified program.

Fredericton is well-known for its engineering firms and he said the nuclear industry needs local engineering companies that know the lay of the land.

That doesn't mean a local engineering company has to be able to design a nuclear reactor.

Wash said they would be involved in constructing buildings and concrete foundations, and doing environmental assessments.

Don Belliveau, Atlantic vice-president for the Fredericton-based engineering firm Stantec -- formerly Neill and Gunter Ltd. -- was one of the companies that met with Wash on Wednesday.

"We are already participating on the project of the Lepreau refurbishment, along with a number of other consultants," said Belliveau.

He said there's a lot of potential work for his company in the so-called nuclear renaissance.

"We see that there is opportunity, certainly in Ontario and maybe in other provinces," said Belliveau. "There is also a lot of work going on in the United States. Some projects are on the verge of being approved."

Stantec has offices in the U.S. The engineering company's expertise is in the non-nuclear side of projects, such as infrastructure and environmental assessments.

Energy Minister Jack Keir said he's pleased Wash was visiting companies in Fredericton and other parts of the province to maximize the industrial benefit from the Point Lepreau refurbishment.

Keir said there's been no talk about government financial assistance to help companies gear up for selling to the nuclear industry.

He also said he expected to get the results of a feasibility study on a second reactor at Point Lepreau early in the new year.