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Premier powers up reactor study

Melissa Dunne
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Proposal to research second nuclear unit to go to cabinet within weeks

With nuclear power enjoying a worldwide renaissance, New Brunswick must speed up a feasibility study on a proposal to build a second nuclear reactor in the province, Premier Shawn Graham said Wednesday.

Graham, speaking to the 28th annual conference of the Canadian Nuclear Society in Saint John, said a proposal for the study will be presented to his cabinet within two to three weeks.

"Clean power will be very important in our province in the years ahead, and as such, the possibility of a second nuclear unit at Point Lepreau is very interesting to us, and will be closely examined."

The crowd responded with a standing ovation.

If approved by cabinet the feasibility study will look at a range of issues, including: whether to publicly or privately fund the reactor, the risks involved, and what markets the province could sell their energy to.

"No stone will be left unturned," he told the crowd. "Everything from the business model, the economic benefits, the technology and the market potential for electricity - it's all on the table.

-‰"¦"‰Nuclear has a strong role to play in satisfying that market demand - that's why its important we launch the feasibility study sooner rather than later."

Graham said that during his recent trips to New York and New England U.S. leaders expressed interest in importing electricity from the proposed second reactor. While the interest is encouraging, Graham noted many issues surrounding exporting the electricity still have to be resolved.

The existing reactor, being refurbished at Lepreau for $1.4 billion, is a Canadian-made Candu heavy water reactor - as is every other nuclear power plant in Canada. In the last 10 years, Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. has also sold six reactors to international customers - more than any other nuclear vendor.

However, it is not a foregone conclusion that AECL would build the second reactor, at an estimated cost of $5 billion.

The province has held preliminary discussions with AECL about a second Candu reactor. Energy Department staff have also had discussions with other companies and countries about their nuclear technology.

"Obviously the government has to look at all their options," Dale Coffin, an AECL spokesman, said at the conference. "But the Canadian technology is based on Candu. We believe there is opportunity for growth in Canada in the nuclear sector."

During his speech Graham sang the praises of the nuclear industry.

New Brunswick needs to diversify its economic base by moving away from the manufacturing sector to energy, specifically to the nuclear sector, said Graham.

He is not the only one excited about nuclear. Many politicians worldwide are looking at wind, solar, and nuclear power to slash their carbon emissions and meet Kyoto targets.

Since 1983 Point Lepreau Generating Station has produced 100 million megawatt-hours of electricity, displacing the equivalent of about 153 million barrels of oil and averting the emission of about 77 million tonnes of CO2.

But the future of nuclear is not completely rosy. Many have voiced their concerns over proper disposal of nuclear waste.

Recently, the industry-run Nuclear Waste Management Organization recommended the federal government spend billions of dollars on a central repository for nuclear waste, 1,000 metres into the bedrock of a remote part of the Canadian Shield. Ottawa has not acted on the recommendation.

Point Lepreau's waste is stored on-site and constantly monitored.

The news of the feasibility study moving ahead doesn't sit well with David Coon, policy director of the New Brunswick Conservation Council.

"We haven't even begun rebuilding the reactor from the old one that wore out early, which is going to cost at least $1.5 billion, and they're speeding ahead with this," he said.

Coon said he agrees the province must diversify its energy sources and move to cleaner power, but believes nuclear should not be the choice.

"We absolutely need to be doing that but with green energy sources that are based on resources right here"‰"¦"‰wood, wind, water and sun," he said.

During last fall's provincial election, Graham made a commitment to make Saint John the energy hub of Atlantic Canada.

"I'm sure it will happen," said Saint John Mayor Norm McFarlane. "We came closer to being the energy hub when the pipeline was approved"‰"¦"‰because everything works around that. And now the EIA guidelines have come out on the second oil refinery, and then the announcement of the possibility of a second nuclear reactor.

"We can't be anything but the energy hub for Atlantic Canada."

Graham is scheduled to meet with leaders in France next week to discuss energy issues.