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AECL offers to help with study of second nuclear reactor in New Brunswick

Canadian Press: Kevin Bissett

FREDERICTON (CP) - The New Brunswick government may have some help when it finally decides who will conduct a feasibility study into a second nuclear reactor at Point Lepreau.

Liberal MP Paul Zed said Tuesday that federal Natural Resources Minister Gary Lunn has written him to say that Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. may be prepared to join NB Power in paying for the analysis.

"The Point Lepreau site was built to accommodate a second nuclear reactor, making it the most logical location for this project," said Zed, who represents a Saint John area riding.

AECL, a wholly-owned federal Crown corporation, built New Brunswick's existing CANDU reactor in 1983 and is involved in its current refurbishment.

Zed said the upgrade - designed to extend the life of the reactor by 25 years - is just the first step towards making the Saint John area an energy hub for the region.

"Atomic Energy has moved offices to Saint John, and that has put 60 technical advisors and nuclear specialists into our region during the refurbishment, he said.

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"Just in the refurbishment work alone there are hundreds of millions of dollars in outsourcing that can be done for refurbishments throughout the world, out of Saint John, if we do this refurbishment project right."

New Brunswick Energy Minister Jack Keir said he has discussed a feasibility study with AECL and other groups around the world, and a decision will be made before the end of the summer.

"This feasibility study is to determine the business case," said Keir. "Is the market there? Are there long term opportunities to sell power? Is the transmission capability there, and if not how do we get it?"

The minister said if New Brunswick decides to build a new reactor, he wants a commitment from the winning company to create a nuclear industry in the province.

Just last month, a New Brunswick environmentalist said he doubts a second nuclear generating station will ever see the light of day in the province.

David Coon of the New Brunswick Conservation Council said there are too many barriers to the sale of the province's nuclear power in the United States to permit a multibillion-dollar expansion at Point Lepreau.

"There's no capacity to get that much power into New England because of the lack of transmission capacity in southern Maine," Coon said.

He also doubts New England utilities would be interested in signing the 20-year contracts that would be necessary to cover the enormous financial risk associated with an expansion at Point Lepreau - the only nuclear reactor in Atlantic Canada.

"It's an open market down there, so why would anyone lock themselves in for 20 years?" Coon said.