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Saved by nuclear power? No

Opinion

JIM WARREN

DURHAM - (The nuclear industry's) hoax has persuaded some people who should know better that nuclear power is a realistic and indeed an indispensable solution to climate change. -- *Amory Lovins, Rocky Mountain Institute*

What's the most compelling reason Progress Energy should stop planning new reactors at its Shearon Harris nuclear plant?

Global climate change. North Carolina doesn't have time to gamble on new nuclear plants, nor spend years fighting over whether to build them.

Global warming is accelerating toward potentially catastrophic weather changes -- including more severe storms and droughts. Experts, including NASA climatologist James Hansen, warn that the process could become unstoppable within 10 years and that greenhouse gas reductions must begin immediately.

Efforts to resuscitate nuclear power are impeding climate stabilization by squandering time and resources needed to cut greenhouse gases. And if Progress Energy actually commits to new reactors, the result would be increased greenhouse gas emissions for many years.

Hold it! Isn't nuclear "clean"?

Only in the artful tongue of the nuclear companies' public relations machine.

True, using the heat of nuclear fission to generate electricity produces no greenhouse gasses directly. But in building the power plant -- a major undertaking -- enormous amounts of fossil fuel would be used for producing and transporting concrete, metal and plastic components. They would cause toxic and greenhouse emissions during years of construction. Although some of that energy would be expended outside North Carolina, the entire life-cycle emissions would be attributable to the Harris plant.

Researchers van Leeuwen & Smith and others estimate it could take nine to 25 years of plant operation just to break even with the energy going into nuclear plant construction, decommissioning and the multi-faceted, energy-intensive fuel cycle.

It could take well over 20 years before the first new Harris reactor (Progress has said it could be on-line in 2016 if a decision to proceed is made) contributes any net greenhouse gas reductions. It's entirely possible that it never would, due to:

- 1) Numerous unknowns involving design, licensing and construction, 2) the dwindling supply of high-grade uranium (lower grade ores require even more energy to convert into reactor fuel) and 3) potential project failure caused by a severe nuclear accident or terrorism anywhere, loss of

federal subsidies, economic downturn -- or by society becoming energy-smart. Those and other scenarios could leave North Carolina ratepayers with a multi-billion dollar nuclear albatross and a spike in power bills.

Standard & Poor's warns that new reactors are high-risk investments. That's why Progress Energy will gamble only if federal -- and probably state -- subsidies can be secured.

The nuclear PR machine also claims reactors are increasingly safe and economically sound. If true, why does the industry insist taxpayers insure new reactors against disasters -- and help finance them?

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Even if new nuclear plants were safe, North Carolina cannot simultaneously build large power plants and cut greenhouse gases. We must address the enormous challenge of climate change through a concerted effort to enhance energy efficiency programs, while phasing in readily available co-generation and renewable energy technologies.

This debate must not be dominated, as in the past, with Progress Energy spending millions of ratepayer dollars to block such programs -- nor using its lobbying muscle, image advertising and targeted philanthropy to persuade regional leaders to endorse new reactors without scrutinizing the merits and risks.

We urge civic leaders to conduct open, balanced forums where the utility can explain its plans and answer the critics' tough questions.

Despite NC WARN's long-running criticism about Progress Energy's practices, we urge its managers to avoid a prolonged fight over new reactors, and join citizens in a cooperative approach for mitigating the unprecedented challenge posed by global warming. We propose realigning the rate structure so the utilities can benefit by helping customers save electricity -- and avoid gambling on new plants -- instead of the current system that drives maximum energy sales.

Otherwise, North Carolina must reassert its control over the corporate charter and monopoly market granted to Progress Energy by the people. The time has come for responsible action.

Jim Warren is executive director of NC WARN (Waste Awareness & Reduction Network).

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