

Energy Insider by William Engdahl

U.S. nuclear bottleneck

What it will mean to reverse four years of antinuclear government policy.

Idaho Sen. Jim McClure, new head of the Senate Energy Committee, told a meeting of the Chemical Manufacturers Association recently that there will be a major push in the new Reagan administration to get the nuclear-power construction program back on the track. This decision is one of the most important ones a new administration could make to renew real industrial growth and exports in the American economy.

It is useful here to look at the damage we need to repair.

In the first nine months of 1980, more than 48 nuclear power projects in the U.S. were delayed; eight reactors were canceled. The total electric power loss comes to over 61,000 megawatts. For comparison, the present total of the domestic reactor output is approximately 55,000 megawatts.

A typical 1,000 megawatt plant saves the annual equivalent of 10 million barrels of oil. So, last year alone, because of the post-Three Mile Island chaos and regulatory obstruction, we lost the future equivalent of 610 million barrels of oil, almost 2 million barrels per day!

But this is not the end of it. Aside from the loss of construction orders totaling between \$55 and \$100 billion, conservatively estimated, we have frozen progress on development of nuclear fuel-reprocessing or recycling.

When the Carter administration

took office, they halted development of the nuclear fuel-reprocessing facility being built by General Atomic at Barnwell, S.C. In his Senate confirmation testimony, Energy Secretary James Edwards, who had strongly supported Barnwell as governor of South Carolina, stated that this delay has halted production of reprocessed uranium from spent fuel rods. Had we gone ahead with Barnwell, now mothballed, we could be saving the equivalent of 1 million barrels of crude oil imports per day.

In December, we imported a total slightly less than 5 million barrels per day.

The pattern of the last several years is also worth review. In 1973, during the height of the OPEC oil embargo, 41 nuclear-reactor orders were placed, followed by 26 more in 1974.

By 1975, it had dropped sharply down to four, the next year to three, down to two in 1978, and zero for the last two years of the Carter administration, due to cost overruns that were caused primarily by absurd environmentalist and legal challenges.

Right now, we have 87 nuclear plants totaling 96,000 megawatts of power under construction. Since the hysteria around Three Mile Island, the environmentalist-infested Nuclear Regulatory Commission has succeeded in imposing a de facto moratorium on new construction permits.

Last week, the NRC finally indicated it may get off dead center to impose a new rule which could unclog the pipeline and allow the approval almost immediately of some 19 nuclear reactors, including 8 awaiting approval by the Westinghouse Offshore Power Systems subsidiary. The decision awaits agreement on procedure from the NRC's Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards, another encumbrance added to complicate an efficient and reasonable regulatory process in the post-Three Mile Island climate.

The case of Westinghouse Offshore Power Systems is worth special note. The facility, in Jacksonville, Florida, has been in limbo for the last two years since New Jersey Governor Byrne and his state energy commission Joel Jacobson came down against four floating nuclear-plant units to be stationed three miles offshore from Atlantic City.

Since then, one of the most important advances in the nuclear industry has been kept in limbo.

The Jacksonville facility would have been one of the world's first assembly-line manufacture of nuclear plants to be assembled on barges floated to final siting, either offshore or inland.

The Jacksonville facility, if it is revived, could provide up to 7 complete plants per year.

By contrast, under present regulatory absurdities, it can take as long as 12 years to build a single custom-built plant.

Of course, as with other areas, the rest of the world has not stopped while we did. The U.S.S.R. just announced that its Atomash plant at Volgodonsk will begin turning out mass-produced fission plants on assembly lines.