

Forum highlights nuclear plans

Pros, cons of third reactor discussed

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Supporters and opponents of nuclear power faced off Wednesday, May 20, under the auspices of a forum sponsored by the Calvert and St. Mary's county chapters of the League of Women Voters.

The handling of nuclear waste was one fulcrum of discussion, with panelists discussing the safety and viability of short- and long-term storage methods.

Brian O'Connell, director of the Nuclear Waste Program Office for the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, said the federal government, not utility companies, is responsible for nuclear waste disposal. He lamented that plans for a permanent site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada have been put on hold by the Obama administration, a decision he said was politically motivated.

"We're not supposed to be partisan, I guess, but don't Democrats like forming committees?" he asked.

George Vanderheyden, president and CEO of UniStar Nuclear Energy, which is seeking permission to build a third reactor at Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant in Lusby, stressed that utilities are responsible for waste storage as long as it is on-site, and said the plant is currently equipped to store its waste for the next 60 years.

But Kevin Kamps of the anti-nuclear group Beyond Nuclear said that is not nearly long enough.

Plutonium, a byproduct of nuclear fission found in waste, has a half-life of 24,000 years, meaning it will be emitting dangerous gamma rays for between 240,000 and 480,000 years, he said.

"It's a forever-deadly radioactive poison for which there is no solution," he said.

Yucca Mountain would not have solved the problem either, in his opinion.

"Yucca Mountain has been the illusion of a solution to the nuclear waste problem for 25 years and now that illusion is gone. ... There are no easy answers to this problem. In fact, you can go back to Enrico Fermi, who first split the atom in Chicago in 1942. That waste has not yet been permanently stored," Kamps said.

The Beyond Nuclear representatives also disagreed with power plant officials about the susceptibility of waste storage structures to terrorist attack. The casks containing spent fuel stored at Calvert Cliffs are kept in a steel-reinforced concrete bunker, plant officials said, making access by terrorists very unlikely.

"It's not like you can walk up and take this stuff. You need trucks; you need cranes; you need equipment, and the assumption is our security guards would be shooting at them," Vanderheyden said.

But Kamps said the real issue is not theft but an attack on the storage facility that could release nuclear waste into the environment. He said tests at Aberdeen Proving Ground had shown that explosives could breach the casks.

"These containers are made of concrete and steel. These are not magical materials," Kamps said.

Beyond Nuclear supported alternative energy as an alternative to nuclear plants, but other speakers said wind and solar generation have their place but cannot be counted on to provide power around the clock.

"Wind and solar are wonderful. The cost is coming down, production is up, but it's never going to be at a scale for baseload power which you can rely on 365 days a year, seven days a week, which is what you get" from conventional sources of power, O'Connell said.

Vanderheyden said that to replace the 1,600-megawatt proposed reactor, Maryland would need more than 4,500 windmills, spread out in different locations throughout the state to capture wind at different times of day. A windmill can only be counted on to provide power about one-third of the time, he said.

Kevin Crowley, director of the Nuclear and Radiation Studies Board at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said the nuclear industry would not take more risks than necessary with nuclear plants because of the costs resulting from mistakes.

"The utility people are not fond of inventing things. A power plant is about as bad a place to conduct experiments as there are," he said.

He also said refined uranium has an "energy density" of about 10 million times that of coal, making it relatively efficient to mine and transport.

"It's phenomenal how small an amount of matter this is," Crowley said.

In response to questions about massive delays and cost overruns at a UniStar project in Finland, Vanderheyden conceded that there have been problems but said all financial risks are borne by the contractor and the shareholders, not by the public. A project in Normandy, France, which has the same design as the proposed third reactor has been proceeding well despite some glitches, he said.

"I'm absolutely certain if we build Calvert Cliffs there will be problems along the way with construction. You've all built homes, perhaps, and you know there are always problems," he said, but any problems would be fixed before the plant goes online.

John Massari of Chesapeake Beach, who works at the plant, said "It was an informative presentation" that had no effect on his positive views of nuclear power.

Paul Kelley of Leonardtown, who is not connected with the industry, was even more emphatic.

"Basically the operators of Calvert Cliffs are proceeding in a very responsive manner. They are very sensitive to what the community is interested in. ... I was pro going in, even more going out," he said. He also praised Constellation's agreement with the AFL-CIO to use union labor to construct the reactor, something Vanderheyden announced for the first time at the forum.

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