

Obama steps up nuclear energy commitment, creates commission

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Washington - US President Barack Obama on Friday stepped up his commitment to nuclear energy as part of the solution to global warming, marking a shift in policy that is partly designed to end a deadlock with opposition Republicans over energy policy. Obama tasked a new commission to make proposals within two years on how to better manage used nuclear fuel and waste. He said nuclear energy was key to weaning the United States off its dependency on foreign fossil fuels.

Obama also plans to triple government loan guarantees for the nuclear industry to 54 billion dollars when he unveils his 2011 budget next week, US media reported. The Energy Department is in the process of deciding which companies should get the first round of loan guarantees that were proposed last year. The 15-member nuclear commission includes a mix of business, environmental and union leaders. It will be headed by Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic lawmaker who led an inquiry into the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and Brent Scowcroft, who was national security adviser to former presidents Gerald Ford and George HW Bush.

The United States generates about one-fifth of its electricity from nuclear energy, yet the country has not granted a permit for building new commercial nuclear power plants in more than two decades.

"Expanding our nation's capacity to generate clean nuclear energy is crucial to our ability to combat climate change, enhance energy security, and increase economic prosperity," Obama wrote in a memorandum to his energy secretary. Obama's shift on an issue long championed by Republicans began Wednesday with the president's State of the Union address before Congress. Obama told lawmakers that nuclear energy and offshore oil drilling should be part of a comprehensive energy bill that faces an uphill battle in the US Senate. Some environmental groups have expressed concern over the new-found interest in nuclear fuel.

"This expansion of the nuclear loan guarantee program ... will come at the expense of the real solutions to the climate crisis, such as efficiency and renewable sources like wind and solar power," said Kevin Kamps of the watchdog group Beyond Nuclear.