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Bennett calling for 100 new N-plants

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Senate Republicans led by Utah Sen. Bob Bennett called Monday for building 100 new nuclear plants in the United States over the next 20 years.

They say that would help reduce global warming just as much as the "cap and trade" proposals by Democrats to cut greenhouse-gas-causing, carbon-based energy such as coal or oil but would still provide cheap power needed to keep the U.S. economy vibrant.

"One of the driving forces behind America's economic growth for the last 100 years has been our access to what we call cheap energy," Bennett said as he chaired a Senate Republican Conference hearing on nuclear energy that featured nuclear scientists, economists and witnesses from business groups.

"If we're going to survive in the kind of economy we want, we have to have continued access to cheap energy," he said. Bennett then asked the GOP-invited experts where such cheap energy could come from while also fighting global warming, and they each pointed to nuclear energy.

Such response was not a surprise, as Republicans had large posters behind Bennett during the hearing saying, "The climate-change debate: 100 new nuclear plants or new national energy tax," and "100 new nuclear plants in 20 years: Why we should do it."

Republicans worry that the Democrats' "cap-and-trade" plan is designed to make coal or gas power so expensive that businesses will be economically forced to look at "greener" alternatives. Bennett and GOP witnesses said that essentially would become an energy tax that could hammer the economy.

The GOP's experts said nuclear power would not produce any more waste than many other types of energy, and would be safe — even though nuclear energy has created worry.

Bennett noted that he has toured nuclear plants in France that reprocess their nuclear waste to produce more usable fuel from it, and reduce the amount of waste produced.

"By the time they end up doing that, the physical waste (at the end) is really very small," he told the hearing.

"I remember asking the fellow who ran the plant, 'OK, when you get down to this final, final product and there's no more energy left and there's nothing left to do with it, what do you do with it?' He said, 'We store it in the green building out back,'" Bennett said.

He added that shows that a huge repository for nuclear waste — as has been proposed for Yucca Mountain, Nev. — may not be needed. And while reprocessing is expensive, it may be wiser to spend money on it than on Yucca Mountain or on cap-and-trade plans.

Bennett added that the United States chose not to pursue reprocessing initially for fear it could lead to weapons-grade plutonium that might allow terrorists to make atomic bombs — but said the waste and modern nuclear plants themselves are safer than many may realize.

For example, he said, if a terrorist broke into a building containing end-product, reprocessed nuclear waste, "Could he get hold of something that could be used as a terrorist weapon? It's my understanding that the answer to that question is no" — and the GOP-invited experts agreed.

The hearing was arranged by Senate Republicans to draw attention to their own ideas for energy reform as committee debate begins on Democratic proposals. Because of that, no Democratic senators participated, and only the GOP chose all experts invited to testify.

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