

Obama administration maintains commitment to nuclear power

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US Energy Secretary Steven Chu reiterated the Obama administration's commitment to nuclear power, despite the calamitous events in Japan, at hearings before congressional committees March 15 and 16.

"The American people should have full confidence that the United States has rigorous safety regulations in place to ensure that our nuclear power is generated safely and responsibly," he told a House subcommittee Tuesday, adding, "The administration is committed to learning from Japan's experience as we work to continue to strengthen America's nuclear industry."

Chu is a Nobel-prize-winning physicist who has been previously called on to use his scientific credibility as a cover for an energy industry catastrophe. He defended the oil industry last year during the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. He plays the same role now amid mounting concerns over the safety of nuclear power.

His appearance before the House subcommittee came a day after Germany announced the temporary shutdown of seven older reactors, for safety checks, and the same day China announced it was suspending its entire nuclear reactor construction program, affecting 27 planned reactors, pending examination of the lessons of the Japanese disaster.

The Obama administration has rebuffed calls for similar action in the United States. A major component of Obama's energy policy has been to break the long political deadlock preventing the development of the US nuclear power industry since the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island in 1979. No new reactors have been built during that 32-year period, although power companies have expanded and upgraded their existing sites.

Obama's political career has been closely linked with the nuclear power industry, which is particularly influential in his home state of Illinois, the largest

generator of electricity from nuclear plants. Exelon, headquartered in Chicago, is the largest operator of nuclear power plants, with at least 17. It is also one of the leading campaign contributors to Barack Obama, going back to his first campaign for US Senate in 2004.

Obama's top political aide, David Axelrod, was once a lobbyist for Exelon, and Rahm Emanuel, his former chief of staff, made a fortune as an investment banker in the mergers that created Exelon in 2000.

The principal obstacles to the building of new reactors have been popular fears over their safety, making the regulatory approval process more difficult, and the refusal of the insurance industry to provide coverage for the industry for fear of huge losses in the event of a nuclear catastrophe.

When insurance companies refuse to cover sick children or cancer survivors, corporate America declares its indifference, maintaining that the "market" must be allowed to operate. But when insurance firms refuse to cover companies that build or operate nuclear power plants, big business demands that the federal government step in with laws to free the nuclear industry of liability in the event of a Japan-style disaster and loan guarantees to insure that the enormous construction costs are covered.

The Obama administration has proposed \$36 billion in federal loan guarantees to jump-start the construction of nuclear power plants. This has sparked 20 applications to build new reactors, now pending before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Last week the NRC voted to approve a 20-year license extension to the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant on the Connecticut River border with Massachusetts. The plant's reactor is the same make and model as those at the Fukushima Daiichi plant which are now believed to be in partial meltdown. On Tuesday night,

the agency said the license renewal had been temporarily delayed “as the NRC staff monitors and helps provide technical assistance regarding the ongoing reactor events in Japan.”

In response to questions at the two hearings, Secretary Chu repeatedly defended the safety of US reactors, claiming that those near seismic fault lines and coastal hurricane zones were designed to withstand a double blow—earthquake and tidal wave—like that which severely damaged the Japanese reactors.

He rejected suggestions that the Japanese catastrophe should compel any delay in implementing the administration’s nuclear energy campaign. “I still feel it’s probably premature to say anything other than, ‘We will learn from this, and all forms of energy do present risks,’” he said.

One particularly revealing round of questioning took place on Wednesday, when the chairman of the House Energy Committee, Texas Republican Joe Barton, demanded reassurance that the \$36 billion in loan guarantees would remain available to power companies. Dr. Chu answered, “The president’s budget is what it is.”

“We are asking for loan guarantees,” he continued. “The present budget is also calling for small modular reactors. That position has not been changed.”

Barton pressed: “So that’s a yes?”

“Yes,” Chu answered.

“Good, that’s what I wanted you to say,” Barton concluded.

It should be recalled that Barton was the congressman who last summer, when millions of gallons of oil were fouling the Gulf Coast and destroying marine life, shellfish and birds, publicly apologized to BP for the mild public criticism of the giant oil company by his fellow congressmen and the Obama administration.

Outside the committee hearing, reporters asked Chu whether the Japanese tragedy would create political obstacles to the administration’s aggressive program of nuclear power plant construction. Chu responded, “Before we make wild extrapolations on anything, let’s just find out what’s going on.”

The administration’s response to the unfolding catastrophe in Japan, which threatens incalculable environmental and ecological damage and a terrible toll in disease and death, exposes the fraud of Obama’s supposed commitment to environmental progress. His

administration, and he personally, are driven in their policies by the profit interests of powerful corporations and the geo-strategic striving of American imperialism to lessen its dependence on foreign energy supplies.

The health of the environment and the health and safety of the American people and the world’s population are deemed entirely subordinate to such concerns.

The position of the Obama administration is in complete harmony with that of the congressional Republicans and his potential Republican opponents in 2012. A *New York Times* article surveying a half dozen prospective Republican presidential candidates found that all of them favored continuation or acceleration of nuclear power plant construction, regardless of the events in Japan.



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