NUCLEAR ENERGY AND RADIOACTIVE WASTE
A HOT CHOICE FOR UTAH

Utah's business and government leaders make a serious mistake — and miss an important opportunity — if they buy into the current prejudice that resists expansion of the state's nuclear power and radioactive waste disposal industries. Both economically and technologically, nuclear reactors and waste belong in Utah.

Only three facilities in the United States accept low-level radioactive waste for long-term disposal. One of those is, and another is proposed, in Utah. The Utah desert sites are in hydrologic and geologic conditions ideally suited for this purpose. Low-level waste includes laboratory research and medical diagnostic materials generated throughout the U.S. by the health-care industry and waste materials from the repair or decommissioning of existing reactors. Expanded fees generated from Utah's disposal could replace taxes, expand needed government programs and fund nuclear power and waste research and development at Utah universities.

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Given Utah's population growth projections, the state must fill the power gap as coal-fired plants confront increasing regulatory scrutiny. For decades, Utah has enjoyed cheap, reliable power generated at coal-fired power plants within its borders. As increasing regulation places greater pressure on this power source, refusing to embrace nuclear power will move Utah deeper into an untenable position in the national energy market. The eastern seaboard, and to a lesser extent the Pacific Coast, enjoy a nuclear reactor base mitigating the effects of the regulatory shift. Converting coal-fired plants to natural gas seems promising, but gas still has fossil fuel emissions and arguably forces consumers to choose between electrical and home-heating needs.

Alternative energy sources like wind or solar power cannot be expected to fill the gap (or fuel the growth). While these sources may have a small carbon footprint, their land footprint relative to the amount of energy produced is enormous. Utah's high percentage of public land means that an alternative energy project, if allowed under existing land use plans and designations, must navigate the same challenging labyrinth of environmental and land use laws that traditional energy projects face. Given Utah's long-running and often rancorous debate over the use and protection of public land, devotion of large tracts to alternative energy development is neither quick nor certain.

Admittedly, nuclear power development faces its own development challenges. While a plant could be sited entirely on private land, the water needed must come from public sources. Permitting a nuclear reactor faces its own rigorous permitting process, with a loud, anecdotal and irrational opposition.

Utah's leaders stack the deck against themselves, if they hope to achieve long-term economic growth while not embracing both nuclear power generation and radioactive waste disposal in Utah. This is particularly true as our country creeps into the European regulatory carbon trading model. Long established in Europe, nuclear power is a significant buffer against market and price disruption resulting from a cap-and-trade program. While parts of the U.S. might see similar buffering effects, Utah will not, and its growing base of energy consumers would face the full brunt of price escalations and market disruptions.

In the end, nuclear energy is not a panacea, but neither is it Pandora's box. Nuclear energy and (at least) low-level waste disposal need to be major components of the state's energy and environmental business portfolio. Our business and government leaders need to begin now to educate and remove obstacles rather than waiting to see what the economic and resource challenges of a changing energy market may bring Utah.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Utah CEO.

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