

Nice Try, Nukes

The usual nuclear cheerleaders traveled to Sacramento for the April 10 meeting of the California State Assembly's Natural Resources Committee, where the fate of Assembly Bill 65 was on the docket. Thankfully, their team lost.



AB 65 was the latest attempt by the nuclear lobby to shoehorn their favorite deadly power source into California's clean energy future by pointing out how little carbon it emits – an argument which, as someone once observed, is like quitting smoking by switching to crack cocaine.

The nuke lobbyists argued for the urgent necessity of nuclear power and proclaimed the inability of renewable energy to get the job done, a hymn they have been singing since the early 80s. This flawed premise was most recently refuted a week before the meeting in the April 3 edition of *Bloomberg Green*, wherein Nat Bullard, an advisor to early-stage climate technology companies, wrote a column entitled "Solar and Wind Are Growing Faster Than Fledgling Nuclear and LNG Once Did," charting the ways that wind and solar are eclipsing nuclear and liquified natural gas. "Wind and solar together now generate more electricity than the world's nuclear power fleet," he wrote. "Research group BloombergNEF expects 316 gigawatts of solar power to be added this year, and 110 more gigawatts of wind power as well. . . . The two fastest-growing energy technologies of the past five decades are likely to continue their path, and continue their impact too."

The pitch to the committee was for small modular reactors (SMRs), with the goal of getting around the longstanding state law placing a moratorium on new construction of nuclear reactors until a means for the permanent disposal of waste nuclear fuel has been found. The text of the bill did not specify any particular reason why SMRs should be exempted from the law – a law that PG&E appealed all the way to the Supreme Court and lost.

Everything was going swimmingly as the cheerleaders testified on behalf of the bill, rolling out the nuclear lobby's greatest hits, until Assembly members started making comments like "the cart before the horse," re-stating the problem the moratorium was created to address.

Also, the committee's staff analysis of the bill and a number of public comments, including those from the Santa Lucia Chapter, had already rained on their parade by mentioning the thing that advocates of small modular reactors always try to obscure. The staff report concluded:

“SMRs will exacerbate the challenges of nuclear waste management and disposal. Water-, molten salt-, and sodium-cooled SMR designs will increase the volume of nuclear waste in need of management and disposal by factors of 2 to 30.... In addition, SMR spent fuel will contain relatively high concentrations of fissile nuclides, which will demand novel approaches to evaluating criticality during storage and disposal. Since waste stream properties are influenced by neutron leakage, a basic physical process that is enhanced in small reactor cores, SMRs will exacerbate the challenges of nuclear waste management and disposal.” Good times!

The Assemblymembers decided not to proceed with Assembly Bill 65, thereby declining to repeat the mistake of the Atomic Energy Commission in the 1950s, which notoriously green-lit the construction of nuclear reactors nationwide on the promise that a way to dispose of their eternally radioactive waste product would be found someday soon. We're still waiting.

“Now if only we can take the skepticism voiced by the legislators towards nuclear power and get that reflected back at the current Diablo bait-and-switch they were conned into supporting last summer,” commented David Weisman, Legislative Director of the Alliance for Nuclear Responsibility Legal Fund.