

## Guest editorial: Industry clearly a bad investment

BY DON SAFER • FEBRUARY 24, 2010

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Nothing about the serious perils of our climate crisis changes the fatal flaws of nuclear power. President Barack Obama's decision to throw more federal dollars at the already heavily subsidized, troubled nuclear industry is deeply disappointing.

This is not change you can believe in. It is not change at all. It is yet another attempt to prop up a failed industry that cannot sustain itself in the free market without massive government support.

The proposal to provide \$54 billion in federal loan guarantees for new nuclear plants proves the point. Government backing would be unnecessary if nuclear were a good investment. The Congressional Budget Office estimates a 50 percent default rate.

The nuclear power establishment has tried for 60 years to turn the knowledge that created the horror of nuclear weapons into a benevolent tool to produce electricity. While they have figured out how to generate electricity with nuclear fission at enormous cost, they have not figured out what to do with the more enduring products: highly radioactive nuclear waste. These dangerous remains are a legacy for mankind to isolate from our biosphere for literally hundreds of thousands of years.

During the campaign, Obama was vague and apparently misleading about his position: He said that we had to figure out the conundrum of nuclear waste before we could move forward with new nuclear plants. That has not been done. Since his election he has canceled the disputed 20-year-old plan to place our incredibly radioactive used fuel rods under Yucca Mountain. There are now 63,000 metric tons in the United States waiting for safe, permanent disposal.

These extremely dangerous and difficult to handle materials are being stored on-site at every nuclear power plant (including TVA's Browns Ferry, Watts Bar and Sequoyah) — first in overcrowded cooling pools and then in dry casks outside the reactor containment shells. The casks were meant as a temporary solution with a designed life of about 50 years. They have become the de facto repository.

Obama calls nuclear power safe and clean energy. He seems to have gotten his script from the nuclear industry. Could that be because he has received substantial campaign contributions from them? Illinois-based Exelon, the largest nuclear operator in the U.S., has been a major financial supporter of Obama.

The nuclear industry says it cannot operate without relief provided by the Price-Anderson Act. This federal subsidy gives operators liability protection from the possible hundreds of billions of dollars in claims that a major nuclear accident could cost. If nuclear power were safe, why would its operators need this taxpayer-funded relief?

The irony is that we just don't need new nuclear plants. Energy efficiency can save us huge amounts of electricity. Natural gas can serve as a transitional fuel. In recent years, more wind power has been added to the grid than any other source. The 21st century will bring a revolution in our energy mix with cost-effective solar, efficient storage systems, fuel cell and hydrogen. The smartest people in the world are working on many other innovative ideas. We can and must find solutions that will leave a healthier legacy to future generations instead of increasing quantities of radioactive waste.

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**Don Safer is board chairman of the Tennessee Environmental Council.**