

Do Less Harm is Best Energy Policy

By Michael Mariotte

On May 26, 1958 President Dwight D. Eisenhower stood on a podium and flicked a switch that ushered in the nuclear power age. By turning on the Shippingport nuclear power reactor, the first commercial atomic reactor in the U.S., Eisenhower made a giant stride toward his goal of “Atoms for Peace” and energy independence for the U.S. Or so he thought.

Today, President George W. Bush has become enamored with the same technology that captivated President Eisenhower. Although with some 50 years of experience of safety failures, cost overruns, security threats and unsolvable radioactive waste problems, Bush has much less justification.

President Bush would have us believe that nuclear power is the future. With reprocessing of radioactive waste, he says we could have a limitless supply of nuclear fuel that can produce hydrogen for future vehicles and electricity for “plug-in” hybrids in the meantime. His version of atomic power would produce electricity without greenhouse gas emissions. Then, he says, we can declare independence from the bad Saudis, or Venezuelans, or whoever the current oil boogeyman happens to be.

In fact, Bush would bring us back to the 1950s—back to an obsolete atomic technology whose drawbacks have, since the beginning, outweighed whatever benefits it may once have offered.

Give Bush credit for this: he has identified the problem correctly, or at least part of the problem. The U.S. is addicted to oil, and that has to stop—for the sake of energy independence and the survival of the planet.

But the U.S. is also addicted to other greenhouse gas emitters like coal, nuclear power, and natural gas. It is way past time that we move toward an energy policy that will reduce greenhouse emissions while providing us with the energy we need for transportation, to heat and cool our homes and offices, to keep our beer cold and our dinners hot.

Bush’s energy policy would not do that. It’s too timid, too reliant on the same big oil, big nuclear, big coal interests that got us into this jam in the first place. Far from being forward-thinking, it’s a throwback to a futuristic vision from the 1950s that never came about.

An energy policy for the 21st century would start with a simple axiom: do less harm to the Earth while providing for our energy needs.

As an obvious first step, that Bush has avoided, we need to increase vehicle mileage standards. There is no other action that the government could take that would more effectively reduce oil imports and reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the same time. A

president who truly believed we are “addicted to oil” would make this a centerpiece of his energy policy.

The next step is to focus our limited research and development dollars on technologies that actually can succeed both at providing energy and reducing emissions. Those technologies are solar power, wind power, energy efficiency, geothermal, and yes, in the future, green hydrogen—hydrogen produced by renewable resources. We also need to pursue distributed energy systems, to reduce reliance on large power plants of any kind. When a 1,000 MW nuclear plant goes down for refueling or repairs, another 1,000 MW of standby power needs to be there to replace it. With a distributed energy system of numerous smaller-scale electrical generators, that type of expensive backup power is no longer needed.

Nuclear power plays no role in an effective energy policy for the 21st century. The epitome of 20th century technological arrogance and overkill, nuclear power has yet to solve any of the problems that have plagued it from the beginning: safety, economics and radioactive waste. And in the 21st century, nuclear power poses a unique new threat—as a terrorist target like no other. Conversely, what terrorist would bother knocking down a windmill?

President Bush’s recent embrace of reprocessing as a solution for radioactive waste disposal is emblematic of the failures of nuclear power. More than 50 years into the nuclear age, no nation in the world has yet found an acceptable solution of radioactive waste. In the U.S., progress on opening the proposed Yucca Mountain, Nevada, nuclear waste site has deservedly slowed to a crawl. Choosing reprocessing of nuclear fuel—a dirty, dangerous, expensive endeavor spurned by the industry itself, is more an admission that our radioactive waste programs have failed than a real alternative. The terrible failures of reprocessing in France and the United Kingdom—not to mention failed efforts to build a “fast” reactor to take full advantage of reprocessing—should be a red flag to the U.S. that this path just won’t work.

Moreover, the initial \$250 million Bush is requesting for this program is the proverbial tip of the iceberg: implementation of a commercial-scale reprocessing program would cost tens of billions of dollars—and send electricity rates soaring.

Our energy path forward is clear, but George Bush the oilman still doesn’t get it: we need to invest in sustainable energy technologies and vastly increased energy efficiency. President Bush took a first step by admitting our oil addiction. Now the rest of us will have to bypass his 50-year old program and instead embrace those energy solutions that offer a future, not more of the failed programs of the past.