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Former New Jersey Gov. Christie Whitman says nuclear power a good fit for New Jersey

By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, April 29, 2010 |

ATLANTIC CITY - New Jersey should look to nuclear power to meet its future energy needs, former Gov. Christie Whitman told a group of political and business leaders Thursday.

Whitman was a guest panelist during a moderated discussion on nuclear energy for the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

The center is part of the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

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Whitman, former head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, is co-chairwoman of a nonprofit group called the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition. The nonprofit was established to promote nuclear power on behalf of the Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's trade organization, according to the watchdog group The Center For Media and Democracy.

Whitman has written several op-ed pieces and was invited to speak on the topic.

"'The Simpsons' isn't the best place to get information on nuclear power," she said of the long-running Fox network series that often satirizes nuclear plants. "Somebody in the show works at the plant, Bart? I don't know. I don't watch it."

PSEG is preparing to ask the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to relicense the company's three Salem County nuclear plants, Salem 1, Salem 2 and Hope Creek in Lower Alloways Creek Township. The company also plans to ask for permission to build a fourth.

PSEG Power President William Levis, one of Thursday's guest speakers, said the company built an information center to assure the public that nuclear power is safe, reliable and clean.

This month the company reported a leak of the radioactive material tritium to federal regulators at Salem 2 and is still cleaning up a 2002 leak at Salem 1. That tritium spill contained the highest level of radioactivity measured of 33 leaks at plants nationwide, according to the NRC.

Meanwhile, security questions were raised this year when a maintenance worker for a contractor who had access to secure portions of PSEG's power plants was arrested in Yemen as a suspected

member of the terror group al-Qaeda after allegedly shooting a hospital guard to death.

That man, former Buena resident Sharif Mobley, 26, had "red badge" clearance to sensitive portions of the Hope Creek and Salem plants where he worked after passing security checks.

Nuclear power has been a hard sell in the United States since the meltdown at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979 and the nuclear explosion at the Chernobyl plant in 1986.

No new plants have been built in America in more than 20 years. But public opinion about nuclear power has improved in recent years, according to polls.

The Obama Administration this year announced plans to provide federal loan guarantees to build new plants in Georgia.

"Fifteen years ago I didn't think we could have this conversation about the future of nuclear power," Levis said.

Still, getting permits for a new plant could take eight years or more, Levis said.

The state Department of Environmental Protection wants Oyster Creek Generating Station in Lacey Township, the nation's oldest plant, to build a cooling tower as a condition of renewing its water-discharge permit. Oyster Creek's parent company, Exelon, opposes the ruling.

PSEG's Levis said Salem County's plants would lose about 80 megawatts of power efficiency if they had to install cooling towers.

"We visited coastal plants in Finland, France and Japan. None had cooling towers," Levis said. "They asked, 'Why would we have cooling towers?'"

Levis said the Salem County plants have minimal detrimental effects on marine life. Retrofitting cooling towers to the existing plants would be an expensive and complicated task, he said.

"You have to gut the plant to do it. What we're trying to do is talk in facts," he said.

Former state Sen. William Gormley, R-Atlantic, and former U.S. Rep. William Hughes, D-N.J., and his wife, Nancy, attended the panel discussion, moderated by NJN News reporter Ed Rodger.

Also in the audience were several Stockton professors and delegates from the Atlantic County Utilities Authority.

Whitman said nuclear power might not be the best option for every state. But New Jersey has good reason to turn to it, she said.

"We have a house looking out at Turkey Point (in Florida) where they're talking about putting in another nuclear plant. I'd like to see it," she said.

She said she was optimistic that the federal government would reconsider using Yucca Mountain, Nev., for long-term storage of spent fuel and other radioactive waste produced at the nation's 104 nuclear plants.

Levis said moving Salem's spent fuel off site would free up enough space to build the fourth nuclear power plant.

"We can safely store nuclear fuel on site for a long time. The question is why would we want to?" he asked.

The NRC will host a public meeting 5 p.m. Thursday at Salem Community College in Carneys Point Township to discuss PSEG's application to renew the permits for its three nuclear power plants.

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