

Committee considers repealing ban on nuclear plants

By Erica Peterson

On Wednesday in the Senate, lawmakers debated whether West Virginia should make it easier for nuclear power plants to be built in the state.

Right now, coal provides most of West Virginia's energy. But in the future, who knows?

In the Energy, Industry and Mining committee, the bulk of the discussion focused on a controversial bill which would repeal a ban on nuclear power in the state of West Virginia.

A 1996 law bans nuclear power plants in the state because they pose a "undue hazard" to safety and health – and because there is no permanent disposal center for nuclear waste in the country.

Senate Bill 240 would repeal this ban. Senator Brooks McCabe says the nuclear ban is antiquated.

"As we move into this multiyear effort to create and implement a solid energy plan that is strategic in base, we have lots of heavy lifting to do," he said.

"And this is one of the issues off to the side that is perhaps not a primary issue in the bigger scheme of things as we speak today, but it is an inconsistency and a harshness that I think a state that is trying to purport itself to be an energy leader probably doesn't have to be so definitive in banning what many states and countries consider an efficient alternative technology."

Only six states have an outright ban on nuclear energy. All of West Virginia's neighbors other neighbors except Kentucky have at least one nuclear power plant.

The bill is making for strange bedfellows – both the West Virginia Coal Association and Don Garvin of the West Virginia Environmental Council are raising concerns.

"I always looked at this as having two real purposes: one was just to protect the public health and safety until the nuclear waste issue gets solved," Garvin said. "And the other was to protect West Virginia electric rate payers."

"And right now, I don't want to give the coal association speech, but I think Bill Raney goes around saying we have the cheapest electricity in the country or something like that, or in the east. And I agree and if you want to raise the rates on West Virginia electric rate payers, this is a good way to do it."

Garvin wouldn't say he preferred coal over nuclear power, but coal is unquestionably cheaper.

"I spoke up in defense of the ratepayer and right now we get all of our electricity in West Virginia from coal and a little bit from renewables, but not much yet," he said. "Just bringing in a nuclear power plant to West Virginia, all that electricity is going to be sold out of state and it's going to raise our rates."

Many committee members felt that the issue deserved more discussion, so committee chairman Mike Green appointed a special study committee headed by Senator Evan Jenkins.

"I'm in favor of discussion of it, I think as chairman of the committee, obviously there's some interest on my part or I wouldn't have made the agenda," Green said. "But I think the key thing is to open this up for discussion."

Nuclear energy provides 20 percent of the country's energy. The senators who spoke in favor of repealing the ban said they don't want West Virginia to get left behind.

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