



In his State of the Union address last week, President Obama did not equivocate on the topic of nuclear power. He talked about the importance of green jobs, and then [added](#), “But to create more of these clean energy jobs, we need more production, more efficiency, more incentives. And that means building a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants in this country.” This was one applause line that sent hands a-clapping on both sides of the aisle. Of course, nuclear power is the poster child for the expression “easier said than done.” Find a safe and trusted new plant design. Build some demonstration projects. Isolate liabilities. Harness hundreds of billions of investment dollars. Solve the long-term, high-level nuclear waste storage problem.

Ah, that pesky storage problem. Senator Harry Reid’s Nevada is not soon to open its arms for completion of the Yucca Mountain facility. There is no other near-term or even mid-range alternative in sight. Over 100 domestic nuclear power plants are currently operating, and, by default, each has become a storage facility of indefinite duration.

While it is rational to gather the experts in an effort to address such challenges, commissions and panels are not much in favor these days. Nonetheless, President Obama has asked Energy Secretary Steven Chu to create a [Blue Ribbon Commission on America’s Nuclear Future](#). He said, in part:

“The Commission should conduct a comprehensive review of policies for managing the back end of the nuclear fuel cycle, including all alternatives for the storage, processing, and disposal of civilian and defense used nuclear fuel and nuclear waste. This review should include an evaluation of advanced fuel cycle technologies that would optimize energy recovery, resource utilization, and the minimization of materials derived from nuclear activities in a manner consistent with U.S. nonproliferation goals.

“In performing its functions, the Commission should consider a broad range of technological and policy alternatives, and should analyze the scientific, environmental, budgetary, economic, financial, and management issues, among others, surrounding each alternative it considers. Where appropriate, the Commission may also identify potential statutory changes.”

He asked that the Commission release a draft report for comment in 18 months, and finish its work within two years.

The Secretary has wasted no time in appointing the panel's 15 members, who include Per Peterson (Chair of the Department of Nuclear Engineering at UC Berkeley) and Albert Carnesale (Chancellor Emeritus and Professor at UCLA). The complete list is [here](#).

The creation of this new two-year process reflects the importance of its mission, but also shines a brighter light on the long road to any new-era nuclear plants in the United States. Only after two more years will the Commission resolve budgets, management issues, and needed statutory changes. Then each of those processes must take its course — likely requiring numerous steps before new projects can move forward. If and when there can be a roll-out of new generating facilities, it will be in phases over many years — likely, decades.

The bottom line: we likely cannot depend on the nuclear power industry to create a significant numbers of new jobs, green or otherwise, in the near-term. Similarly, it would be fool-hardy to rely on nuclear power to meet any near-term goals for reducing greenhouse gases related to power production. The longer-term prospects are a matter for conjecture.