

Energy group wants to terminate nuclear moratorium in Kentucky

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Members of the General Assembly Special Subcommittee on Energy visited Paducah on Friday to gain insight into a localized bill headed to the Legislature this session.

Matthew Crozat, senior director of business policy for the Nuclear Energy Institute, provided information pertinent to a House bill aiming to lift a decades-old moratorium on constructing nuclear power plants in Kentucky. He said the energy institute supports the legislation, which Rep. Gerald Watkins, D-Paducah, who serves as chairman of the subcommittee, plans to introduce.

Watkins said the lifting of the moratorium is the first step in a long road to actually constructing a nuclear production plant in McCracken County. He said that once the ban is lifted, economic development and community leaders can begin recruiting efforts for nuclear projects, which he said local lawmakers will do all they can to help move along.

The moratorium dates back to 1984 and bans the construction of new nuclear power plants in the state. The need for a lift on the ban became more imminent with the recent closure of the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant, which eliminated some 1,200 jobs at the western McCracken County site. Although cleanup efforts are underway, having saved a number of the lost jobs, lawmakers have been working to create a foundation for more production jobs through attempts over the past several years to lift the moratorium.

With a cross section of the subcommittee members boasting a heavy pro-coal stance, the compatibility of coal and nuclear energy was a significant part of the discussion. Crozat said a nuclear energy facility would make sense in a place like Kentucky where coal power plants are abundant. He said the two industries have the opportunity to work together.

Watkins reiterated the point. "Nuclear power doesn't compete with coal. They're very compatible and they each enforce each other's development and use," he said.

Safety was another topic Crozat touched on heavily. Crozat said the Nuclear Regulatory Commission oversees strict safety measures for nuclear facilities that involve layer upon layer of physically separated safety systems. He added that years of working in the industry has created a safety culture among the members of the workforce that also plays significantly into the overall safety of the industry.

Crozart also explained, when prompted to quell concerns from several subcommittee members about the topic, a common misconception exists in the public about the safety and health issues stemming from

nuclear power production. He pointed out it is often the people who live closest to nuclear power who are the ones who support it the most because they see firsthand the strict safety precautions.

“Safety is a bedrock of nuclear operation,” he assured. “At no point would the commission stand for having safety compromised in response to economic jobs.”

“This is finally the time to get it through the House,” Watkins said of the bill. “I’ve talked to the speaker and I don’t see why we couldn’t pass the bill this session.”