WISPOLITICS: Governor urges study of nuclear power, as the energy source makes a comeback

By WisPolitics.com

Gov. Tony Evers, who has focused on renewable energy for much of his time in office, is making a push in his latest state budget to look at expanding nuclear power.

That includes calling for $1 million to study siting a new plant and expanding an existing research credit to cover nuclear power.

Evers told WisPolitics in an interview he’s been thinking about bolstering nuclear energy in Wisconsin’s portfolio “frankly for years.” Evers said he remains committed to the state’s push on wind and solar power, but believes a look at nuclear is needed with the coming energy demands.

The Public Service Commission’s Strategic Energy Assessment, published in November, projected a decrease of peak electric demand of about 5% between 2023 and 2024 before an increase of 14.8% thereafter through 2030. According to the report, “The addition of new and expanding customer loads, such as a data center and transportation electrification, are placing upward pressure on Wisconsin’s energy demands within this timeframe.”

“Frankly, we’re going to need more energy. It’s as simple as that,” Evers told WisPolitics. “We want to have it in a way that’s clean. Nuclear is probably one of the ways that we can get this done.”

Evers isn’t walking away from his push for renewable energy sources in this budget, now before the GOP-run Legislature. He included provisions such as $50 million in general purpose revenue in 2025-26 to increase support for the Green Innovation Fund, which would boost lending and investment in the renewable energy sector.

Along with boosting what environmental groups call the “Green Bank,” Evers' budget would require the Department of Administration to create a grant program for local organizations to promote local climate and clean energy community engagement. He’s also calling for $20 million in 2025-26 to support continuation of the Energy Innovation Grant program that seeks to help investment in projects related to energy efficiency, renewable energy, energy storage and energy planning.

The nuclear push, though, is new. Evers didn’t include any provisions mentioning nuclear power in the previous three budgets he introduced.

Wisconsin’s only nuclear power plant is in Two Rivers, owned and operated by NextEra Energy Resources. One in Carlton closed a dozen years ago. The Two Rivers plant currently generates 5% of the power in Wisconsin. By comparison, among the other zero-carbon energy sources, solar accounts for 9% of production in the state, while 8% comes from wind and 3% from hydropower.

Natural gas continues to account for the largest share of generation capacity at 43% with coal at 29%.

Since the Carlton facility closed, the state in 2016 lifted a moratorium on new nuclear power plants. Some lawmakers have pushed to again consider the option to no avail.

Just ahead of Evers’ budget being released last month, several GOP lawmakers circulated legislation that would require the PSC to conduct a nuclear power siting study and then submit the report to the Legislature no later than 12 months after the bill took effect. The legislation also included a provision that would require the PSC to act on an application for a nuclear plant within 150 days after the submission was completed. Under the proposal, the chair could extend the review period for up to 150 days for good cause.

“An expansion of nuclear power is needed to meet Wisconsin’s growing energy needs,” GOP state Sen. Julian Bradley, one of the bill’s co-sponsors, said in a statement. “I’m glad that the Governor wants to work on this with us. I remain committed to an all-of-the-above approach to powering Wisconsin’s future.”

Wisconsin Conservation Voters urged opposition to the bill, saying it would “cut corners on ensuring the safety of new nuclear facilities” because of the proposed deadline for PSC action.

Evers’ call for a plant feasibility study doesn’t include a provision on the timeline for approving a new nuclear power plant application.

It only proposes $1 million to fund a study by the PSC on the feasibility of a new plant.

Meanwhile, he’s also called for extending a research credit to cover work related to nuclear power. There are similar credits now for research on internal combustion engines and certain energy efficient products.

Evers said in the interview he’s been interested in nuclear energy for years, citing his background as a science teacher. He has spoken with officials in Ontario, Canada, about their efforts to build new small modular reactors. They are about a third of the size of a conventional reactor, and components can be factory-assembled and transported to a site for installation.

Likewise, Evers noted Michigan is preparing to reopen a nuclear power plant that had been shuttered in 2020. State and federal officials have authorized $3.1 billion for the operation, which still needs approval from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. There has also been talk of adding small modular reactors at the site.

“I feel that it’s time to at least take a look at it,” Evers said. “We’re kneecapping ourselves if we just said, ‘Never,’ and I think we should do some studies on it.”

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