

Nuclear Power Proponents Eye Emery County For Two Reactors

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A state representative and others pushing to bring nuclear power to Utah are looking to build not one, but two nuclear reactors in the state and are looking at Emery County as the most likely location.

Last month, Rep. Aaron Tilton, a Springville Republican and CEO of Transition Power Development LLC, signed a contract to secure the rights to nearly 10 billion gallons of water a year to be used in a nuclear power plant proponents are seeking to get licensed.

The contract obtained by The Salt Lake Tribune specifies the Green River in Emery County as the source for the water.

Green River Mayor Ed Bentley said he'd heard his city might be the chosen location for a power plant and that the plant might be nuclear. And that's fine with him. "Anything that would provide good-paying jobs would be excellent for our community," he said.

The town of 949 people sits along Interstate 70, next to U.S. 6 and adjacent to the Union Pacific rail line and power transmission lines that run along the transportation corridor, Bentley said.

Sen. Mike Dmitrich, D-Price, said he, too, has "heard that they've been sniffing around for some ground out there" but didn't know specifics.

"I think they've got something in the bag," said Rep. Mike Noel, R-Kanab, who works for the water district that leased its water to Tilton, but he did not know where the company was looking.

Tilton, however, says the Emery County reference is mainly a placeholder and the company may seek to take water out of the Green or Colorado rivers anywhere from Flaming Gorge to Lake Powell. "We still don't know basically where the thing is going to go," Tilton said. He added the company has hired experts who are looking at the water, transmission and seismic issues.

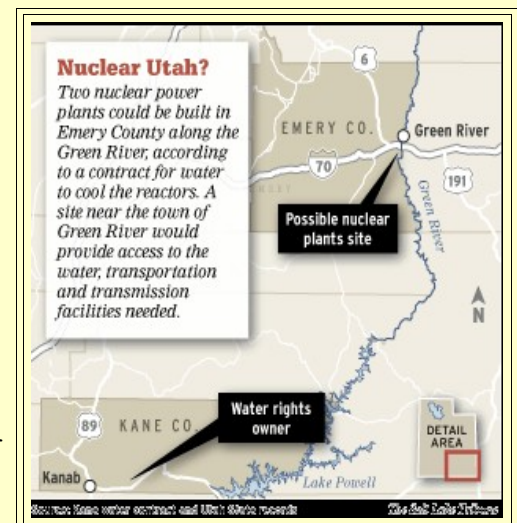
But whatever site the company settles on, Tilton said, it will be looking to build two nuclear plants, one after the other, side-by-side.

Tilton said the operator would have to build the same road, rail spur, reservoir and transmission upgrades to build two power plants as one.

"One unit doesn't give you the scale of economy to give the best competitive advantages," he said.

Transition Power was set up with the goal of finding a good site, acquiring the land and water rights and doing the geotechnical and environmental studies needed to get an Early Site Permit from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said Reed Searle, a partner in the company.

Transition Power would then sell its permit or partner with a power company or consortium of utilities that would build the plant, said Searle, who will soon be leaving his post as executive director of the Intermountain Power Agency, which produces coal power, three-fourths of which is shipped to California.



Consumers in Utah, Colorado, Nevada and California could potentially purchase power from the plant, Searle said.

Tilton and Noel, who heads the Kane County Water Conservancy District, signed the contract Sept. 20 that would transfer rights to 29,600 acre-feet of water, in exchange for payments starting at \$100,000 per year and growing to \$1 million by the time the plant would come on line.

That doesn't mean they "got together and cooked up this deal," said Kanab attorney Ed Robbins, who helped write the document. Rather, he said, the water district board approved the agreement after several months of negotiations and review.

An acre-foot equals 325,851 gallons, enough to supply a Utah household for a year but considered enough for two households in Nevada and Arizona, where per-capita use is lower.

The Utah nuclear power push and the involvement of Tilton and Noel were first reported two weeks ago by the trade publication SNL Energy.

The water comes from an allocation granted in 1965 for the failed Kaiparowits coal-fired power plant proposal. The Kane County water district can hold the rights for 50 years subject to the state engineer's approval of extensions.

The last extension granted in 2004 came with the warning that the next possible extension request, scheduled to come before the state engineer next September, would get a more critical look.

The contract may be legal between TPD and the water district, but it hasn't gotten necessary approval from the Utah Division of Water Rights, said State Engineer Jerry Olds.

"When they actually want to do something, then they'll bring an application to our office," he said. Utah Regional Engineer Boyd Clayton said it's not clear whether the water rights - granted specifically for a location east of Johnson Canyon, halfway between Kanab and Lake Powell - could be used elsewhere.

Tilton's company would have to file what's called a change application that the state engineer would approve or deny based on state code, Clayton said.

A nuclear plant would take water from the river to cool spent fuel rods in a pool and to feed the reactor, which takes the energy from cold water and returns warm water to the waterway. The cooling tanks are a closed system, that is, the water does not go back to the river. Returning the warm water to the Green River would have an effect on the river's ecosystem, but that hasn't yet been analyzed. Also unknown is what effect the nuclear plant proposal might have on any congressional efforts to declare segments of the river wild and scenic.

While Olds said there is no doubt the water is part of Utah's share of the Colorado River and can be used in the state, an extended drought with no end in sight and a warming climate is prompting new looks at the Law of the River that determines how seven Western states have agreed to use it. Tilton's involvement in the project has prompted some critics to question whether he had a conflict of interest that he should have disclosed earlier. The representative, who has been a leading proponent of nuclear power in the Legislature, formed Transition Power in February but did not disclose his involvement until Oct. 12, and had said previously he was not involved in any nuclear projects.