

# Once a sunset industry, the uranium lobby paints a green dawn

**Nuclear propaganda is as fallacious as the rhetoric of the tobacco companies, writes Helen Caldicott.**

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Global warming has been a great gift to a nuclear industry that was on its knees. Its reputation was so dismal that Wall Street investors gave it a wide berth, its only salvation the public teat on which it sucked at the rate of billions of dollars a year.

In this shaky condition the industry recognised a lifeline when it saw it and suddenly it has found its green soul. A sophisticated propaganda machine has shifted into high gear to convince easily duped politicians - including the Minister for Science, Brendan Nelson, a doctor who should understand the medical consequences - and the public that nuclear power is the clean answer to the world's energy problems because it is emission free.

Millions of dollars are being spent in the US by the Nuclear Energy Institute on advertisements featuring joyful children playing and working at their computers, while headlines trumpet: "Nuclear: electricity and clean air today and tomorrow." The copy says: "Kids today are part of the most energy-intensive generation in history. They demand lots of clean electricity."

Of course, these ads are deceitful. The truth is, nuclear power, far from being clean, adds substantially to global warming while exposing neighbouring communities to emissions of carcinogenic radioactive gases. Does this sound and light show seem reminiscent of the tobacco industry in its heyday?

These ad campaigns are ones of desperation. After the fiascos of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl the nuclear industry in the US lost billions of dollars. The construction of dozens of plants was cancelled while others were plagued by massive cost overruns from long delays. Risk-averse investors have shied away from it ever since.

Not to be deterred, and armed with its new green image, the industry is now angling for huge government hand-outs. A subsidy of \$US13 billion (\$17 billion) embedded in a new US energy bill covers tax credits, loan guarantees, a liability cap of \$US580 billion to cover nuclear meltdowns, money for research and development for new reactors, and \$US1.25 billion for nuclear-powered hydrogen cars. Hidden subsidies include preferential tax treatment and decommissioning funds.

This is nothing new. Historically in the US, nuclear power has been totally dependent on the federal umbilical cord. Between 1948 and 1998 it received subsidies of \$US70 billion, while \$US26 billion went to oil, coal and natural gas, only \$US12 billion to renewables - wind,

solar, hydro and geothermal - and \$US8 billion to energy-efficiency technologies. An editorial in The New Scientist notes that when realistic construction and running costs are factored in, the price of nuclear energy is more than doubled. This estimate excludes the cost of managing pollution, accidents, insuring nuclear reactors or protecting them from terrorists.

Now let's turn to global warming, which some well-intentioned but naive scientists say can only be solved by the use of nuclear power.

First, the extraction of uranium for nuclear-power production is very energy-intensive, as is uranium enrichment. In the US the enrichment facilities are powered by two old 1000-megawatt coal-fired plants that pump out large quantities of carbon dioxide. These facilities are responsible for the release of 93 per cent of the ozone-depleting, global-warming CFC114 gas produced every year in the US, although this is banned under the Montreal Protocol.

Nuclear power produces substantial amounts of carbon dioxide - a third of the amount produced by a gas-fired plant, but as the quantity of high-grade ores declines more fossil fuel will be needed to extract uranium from low-grade ores, meaning the whole nuclear fuel cycle will eventually use more calories of energy than it will produce. Furthermore, construction of reactors, and storage and transportation of nuclear waste also use fossil fuel and are very energy intensive.

Finally, uranium supplies are finite. Consider this: if all electricity production was replaced by nuclear power today, there would be just three years' supply of uranium in the world to draw on. Yet the radioactive legacy would bequeath epidemics of malignancy and genetic disease to future generations as nuclear waste leaked into the ecosphere.

Remember "cigarettes don't cause cancer"? The nuclear industry's global warming rhetoric is equally fallacious and equally dangerous.

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