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Old Foes Soften to New Reactors

By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#)

WASHINGTON, May 14 - Several of the nation's most prominent environmentalists have gone public with the message that nuclear power, long taboo among environmental advocates, should be reconsidered as a remedy for global warming.

Their numbers are still small, but they represent growing cracks in what had been a virtually solid wall of opposition to nuclear power among most mainstream environmental groups. In the past few months, articles in publications like *Technology Review*, published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and *Wired* magazine have openly espoused nuclear power, angering other environmental advocates.

Stewart Brand, a founder of the Whole Earth Catalog and the author of "Environmental Heresies," an article in the May issue of *Technology Review*, explained the shift as a direct consequence of the growing anxiety about global warming and its links to the use of fossil fuel.

"It's not that something new and important and good had happened with nuclear, it's that something new and important and bad has happened with climate change," Mr. Brand said in an interview.

For many longtime advocates of environmental causes, such talk is nothing short of betrayal. Because of safety fears that reached a peak during the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 and unresolved questions of how to dispose of nuclear waste, environmentalists have waged unrelenting campaigns against plants from Shoreham on Long Island to Diablo Canyon near the California coast.

But as mounting scientific evidence points to a direct connection between increasing carbon emissions and climate change, Mr. Brand and others have come to see conventional fuels like oil and coal as a greater threat.

In his article, Mr. Brand argued, "Everything must be done to increase energy efficiency and decarbonize energy production." He ran down a list of alternative technologies, like solar and wind energy, that emit no heat-trapping gases. "But add them all up," he wrote, "and it's just

a fraction of enough." His conclusion: "The only technology ready to fill the gap and stop the carbon-dioxide loading is nuclear power."

In recent statements, three top environmental experts - Fred Krupp, the executive director of Environmental Defense, and Jonathan Lash, the president of the World Resources Institute and James Gustave Speth, the dean of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies - have stopped well short of embracing nuclear power, but they have emphasized that it is worth trying to find solutions to the economic, safety and security, waste storage and proliferation issues rather than rejecting the whole technology.

These efforts to edge away from the established orthodoxy coincide with moves by Senator John McCain, a Republican from Arizona, to offer significant financial incentives for the development of three new nuclear technologies -each with its own corporate backer - as part of a bill he and Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, Democrat of Connecticut, are sponsoring to regulate emissions of heat-trapping gases.

"We've got to go to all alternate forms of energy, nuclear power," Mr. McCain told Don Imus during an appearance on his MSNBC show Friday morning.

The addition to the McCain-Lieberman bill, which is being circulated in draft form, would codify a new political bargain. Conservatives would support emission controls in return for liberal support for a new generation of nuclear power plants, a shift that could reshape the existing alignments on these issues.

Details of the proposed new language in the McCain-Lieberman bill, some of which were first reported in The Energy Daily, a trade publication, were provided by a person who had read a draft. He requested anonymity because no final decision on the measure has been made.

Those environmentalists who are newly outspoken in favor of nuclear power lace their views with qualifiers.

Mr. Krupp of Environmental Defense said in an interview, "There are still very serious questions that have not been answered and E.D. is not going to be supporting nuclear power until we get good answers."

But, he added, "We are taking a fresh look and we want to pursue the answers, get the answers, because the global warming problem is so serious."

Mr. Speth of Yale, the author of "Red Sky at Morning," a book painting global warming as a crisis, said in an interview that if there were a national program to control the emission of

heat-trapping gases, "I think we would want nuclear to be one of the technologies that is out there, competing on a level playing field with the others."

The changing attitudes are roiling established environmental groups and provoking fierce internal arguments in the United States and in Europe. In this country, some groups used antinuclear campaigns to build membership, financial support and often their fundamental identities back in the 1970's, when Birkenstocks were new and the folksinger Arlo Guthrie was celebrating the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance.

The release of radioactivity at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania and the catastrophic explosion at Chernobyl in 1986 brought a halt to any thought of expanding nuclear technology in the United States.

Now, groups like Greenpeace U.S.A., the Sierra Club, the World Wildlife Fund and the U.S. Public Interest Research Group argue with one voice that any more time or money spent on nuclear energy would unjustifiably divert resources from more promising solutions, like conservation and renewable energy.

It has been 32 years since the last nuclear reactor was ordered and built in the United States, and 1996 was the last year in which a civilian nuclear reactor - the Tennessee Valley Authority's Watts Bar reactor - was commissioned. Nuclear reactors, almost all of them the first generation of this technology, now provide about 20 percent of electric power in the United States.

Aside from the environmental issues, it is still far from clear when the fundamental economics of energy generation would favor the construction of new nuclear plants in the United States. Officials of electric company officials and those of companies that design and build reactors have said recently that without substantial government help, the costs of winning regulatory approval and building nuclear plants would be dauntingly high for investors.

The proposals that Senator McCain is considering would provide a 50-50 cost-sharing arrangement, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies, to gain federal certification for three new designs for nuclear plants. On Monday he met with Jeffrey R. Immelt, the chairman and chief executive of General Electric, which constructs nuclear plants.

Such subsidies are still anathema to most environmental groups, which believe that the nuclear industry got far more than its fair share of government aid in the last generation, while their technologies of choice were left hungry.

"The notion out there from some of these deep thinkers is that we have to take our medicine and if only we could accept nukes, the global warming problem would be solved," said Anna Aurilio, the legislative director at the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. "We have a whole bunch of solutions already that are not as risky." These include, Ms. Aurilio said, increasing national energy efficiency and investing in solar, wind, geothermal and biomass energy, like ethanol.

Thomas B. Cochran, the director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's nuclear program said: "The issue isn't: Do you support nuclear? The issue should be: Do you support massive subsidies to the tune of billions of dollars for nuclear power?" He said, "The answer is no."

The most frequent objection to nuclear reactors is that they may lead to the spread of nuclear weapons. In an era when hostile or potentially hostile governments like those in North Korea and Iran are gaining proficiency in nuclear weapons technology, opponents ask, why support a technology that would generate more weapons-grade fuel? They also balk at the notion that nuclear waste can be safely and economically stored.

The anger at the magazine articles advocating nuclear power was visceral. In the April edition of Wired, the editors wrote: "In February, we suggested it's time to reconsider nuclear power; readers had a meltdown." They said, "Even onetime environmentalist-in-chief Al Gore chimed in at Davos, complaining directly to our editor in chief."

One letter to the magazine called the article - "Nuclear Now!" by Peter Schwartz and Spencer Reiss - "right-leaning, Cheney-worshipping drivel about clean nuclear power" and said, "The bottom line is that nuclear power is inherently dangerous, and we have no way of disposing of the intensely radioactive trash it generates."

Mr. Brand, the author of the Technology Review article, believes that these arguments will, if anything, get more intense. After "decades of getting a message out and getting a degree of alignment" he said, "it's hard to reverse the polarity on this."

Jerry Slominski, a lobbyist for the Nuclear Energy Institute, a trade group for manufacturers, has yet to see much movement in the core constituencies of environmental groups.

"I think there's a lot of talk, but I haven't seen a real shifting in policy among environmental groups," Mr. Slominski said. "They just don't know how to get from here to there, I think."

But Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, disagreed.

"I do think that things are changing," Ms. Claussen said. "I think people in the environmental

community are getting more realistic about what is possible and what is not. At the same time, they are getting more panicky, maybe, about what you have to do to deal with climate change."