

February 15, 2001

To the Editor:

As a graduate of the Cornell Nuclear Engineering Department (M. Nuclear Engr. '67), I would like to comment on the article in today's issue of The Sun regarding the value of the Ward reactor. (Faculty Senate Looks at Future of Ward Reactor by Maggie Frank)

I'll start by correcting the statement that "the Ward reactor is the only nuclear reactor in New York state." The six operating commercial nuclear power plants in New York generated over 33 million megawatt-hours of electricity in 2000.

The Local Advisory Committee (LAC) is quoted as deciding that there was "no compelling case between the existence of the Ward reactor on the Cornell campus and any role Cornell might play in a possible future resurgence in the field of nuclear power engineering." This is a very odd "decision" considering that we have 104 nuclear power reactors operating in the US today that contribute about 20% of our electricity consumption. There are over 400 operating reactors in the world and more are being built.

The facts are that our needs for electricity, the cost of fossil fuels, and the need to control our emissions of global warming gases will continue to increase. Further reliance on nuclear power may not be welcome but it is inevitable. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has certified in the last few years three advanced reactor designs for future construction and operation in the US. Another such design is under review, and just two weeks ago a utility informed the NRC of its plans to start building several modular gas-cooled reactors as early as 2004. We also can expect most of the operating nuclear plants to have their licenses extended for at least 20 more years.

In addition to nuclear power production, the Ward reactor is a tool for training scientists in a variety of other fields, as stated by others in your article. For example, over 10 million patients per year benefit from nuclear medicine applications in the US.

I understand that nuclear power can be a controversial issue and may not be a political acceptable choice for some. If these biases exist, I hope that they do not undermine Ezra Cornell's dream of creating an institution where any person can find instruction in any study....including nuclear engineering!

I'll conclude by saying that the need to maintain and support our nuclear education infrastructure is becoming an issue of importance in Congress, as exemplified by a bill recently introduced by Senator Bingaman (S.242) that would provide financial support to nuclear engineering institutions and students.

The following are excerpts from Mr. Bingaman's statements when he introduced his bill on February 1st:

"...the lack of adequately trained nuclear scientists and engineers, will affect the ability of the United States to solve future waste storage issues, maintain basic nuclear health physics programs, operate existing and design future fission reactors in the United States, respond to future nuclear events worldwide, help stem the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and design and operate naval nuclear reactors.

We need to concentrate on attracting good undergraduate students to the nuclear sciences.

We need to attract new and young faculty.

...[fundamental research in nuclear science and engineering] will strengthen our industrial base and over all economic competitiveness.

...what I consider the most crucial element of this program -- ensuring that future generations of students and professors have well maintained research reactors.

...[these actions] will strengthen our reputation as a leader in the nuclear sciences, strengthen our national security and our ability to compete in the world market place."

Sincerely,

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