

Nuclear plant in the oilsands just a matter of time, says Energy Alberta, but industry officials not so sure

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Alberta's first nuclear power plant could open in the oilsands within a decade, says a Calgary-based company in talks with several oilpatch players and government officials.

"It'll come, it's just a matter of the date," said Wayne Henuset, director of Energy Alberta Corp.

Henuset, who founded Energy Alberta with Precision Drilling chief executive Hank Swartout, said he's in preliminary talks with three energy companies about building a nuclear plant to produce steam, which is used to separate bitumen — or thick crude oil — from sand.

Greg Stringham, vice-president of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said he is not aware of such talks.

What he knows is that French company Total EP raised the issue when it first came to the oilsands. The French company said last fall that nuclear energy may be one of the options it would explore.

"They are very experienced with nuclear energy in Europe," said Stringham, adding that the technology may become part of the mix in the future.

The nuclear process would replace natural gas, which is typically used for extraction, but has grown costly due to a jump in prices.

"The real challenge right now is getting it down to a smaller scale that makes it economical, because if you put one big nuclear plant in the middle of (the oilsands) the steam that it produces condenses into water before you can get it out to all the plants that need it," Stringham said.

John Starratt, head of business development for Energy Alberta said, "The driver is economics and it's a business arrangement between Energy Alberta and potentially one or two of the players up in the tarsands."

Company officials met this week with members of the Alberta Economic Development Authority, which links businesses with the provincial government, and Henuset said Tory leadership candidate Jim Dinning has also been consulted about

the benefits of nuclear power.

Guy Boutilier, Wood Buffalo-Fort McMurray MLA and environment minister, said no one has contacted him yet about nuclear power in Alberta.

"I do know that the word 'nuclear' does scare people. And obviously we need to be sensitive to that," Boutilier said.

He said all energy is important but there are a lot of environmental impact assessments that would have to be completed.

Along with provincial approval, a nuclear power plant would also require federal approval.

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