

'Whole Earth's' Stewart Brand Backs Nuclear Power

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Weekend Edition Saturday

President Obama announced federal support this week to build the first new nuclear power plants in nearly three decades and many environmentalists announced their opposition. But not the man who published the *Whole Earth Catalog*, and helped invent Earth Day. Host Scott Simon talks with Stewart Brand about the Obama administration's efforts to promote nuclear energy as a clean source of power.

SCOTT SIMON, host:

For an entire generation, nuclear power has been a kind of third rail of alternative energy sources. Although nuclear power doesn't pollute the sky or produce carbon emissions, a generation that grew up with the specter of Chernobyl and Three Mile Island believed that the chances of a nuclear accident were so great and potentially so grave, most environmentalists also consider themselves anti-nuclear power activists.

This week, the Obama administration said that it would support the construction of two nuclear reactors in the state of Georgia the first in the U.S. since the 1970s. That plan, of course, has brought about concerns about the safety and the associated costs. Stewart Brand is one of the inventors of the environmental movement in the United States. Of course, he's founder and editor of "The Whole Earth Catalog. He joins us now from KQED in San Francisco. Mr. Brand, thanks so much for being with us.

Mr. STEWART BRAND (Founder and Editor, The Whole Earth Catalogue): Thanks for inviting me.

SIMON: So how do you feel about these perhaps new construction of nuclear power plants?

Mr. BRAND: I think it's great news. I think what's happened is basically President Obama has ended one argument probably started another. The one he has ended is whether or not the U.S. will expand its nuclear power capacity; the one that's beginning is how it will expand. He has absolutely changed the flavor of the debate. And that's terrific.

SIMON: Hmm. We should make plain, you've surprised a lot of people by supporting nuclear power.

Mr. BRAND: I surprised myself. I used to be, you know, pretty much a kneejerk environmentalist on this particular subject. And then because of climate change I reinvestigated the matter and discovered that I'd been misled in many of the details on how nuclear works. And I finally got to the point where I'm so pro-nuclear now that I would be in favor of it even if climate change and greenhouse gases were not an issue.

SIMON: You also are one of the few people I've ever interviewed who said I was wrong.

(Soundbite of laughter)

SIMON: So tell us exactly what you learned.

Mr. BRAND: Well, what I learned, you know, I've been researching this stuff for a book I did called Whole Earth Discipline. And the research led me into looking at what are the real threats of radiation - way less than we thought; what really happened at Chernobyl - way less than we thought; what are the efficiencies of nuclear - way better than I thought; what is the tradeoff against solar and wind, and one of things environmentalists are just learning now is that because solar and wind are so dilute, they make an enormous footprint on the land in order to collect them and then another large footprint with the long transmission lines. And one of the things I learned...

SIMON: You are talking about, for example, in something like wind energy, miles and miles that have to be turned over to turbines.

Mr. BRAND: Hundred of square miles get turned over to turbines or even more deleteriously to solar farms. And then the other major thing I learned about is that there are now small nuclear reactors being designed that could be distributed in a micro-power format that looks very attractive to an environmentalist.

SIMON: And what about the concern about nuclear waste?

Mr. BRAND: Well, nuclear waste is sort of a first two generations of reactors issue. U.S. has decided to use once through rather than to reprocess the way French and Japanese do. And so we've got a fair amount of nuclear waste that's sitting around in dry cask storage being perfectly okay while we think about it. And either we will use it as fuel in the so-called fourth generation reactors that are being designed now or we could reprocess it the way the French do, or we could stick in the ground, not in Nevada, but it looks like New Mexico, the so-called waste isolation pilot plant, it's been putting nuclear waste in a salt formation for 10 years now, looks like a good place to put this stuff if we wanted just file it and forget it.

SIMON: And what do you say to people who don't want to live next door to a nuclear reactor or down range of one or adjacent to?

Mr. BRAND: The polling is pretty clear on this. The people who turn out to be the most positive about nuclear are people who live near a present nuclear plant; they have tended to have visited the plants, see how clean and safe it is, the local jobs; they'd love to see a couple more reactors added to the side which are usually already licensed. So it's one of those things of, you know, you hear the not in my backyard argument, but if you actually ask people who have nuclear in their backyard, they're pretty enthusiastic about it.

SIMON: And what about the concern that maybe the chances of an accident are small but the consequences are so grave, we shouldn't even risk that small chance?

Mr. BRAND: I've been hearing lately about what really happened at Three Mile Island, which was about as bad as you can get. That was a classic core meltdown. It came 12

days after the movie China Syndrome and so everybody figured, well, this is The China Syndrome underway. And apparently what actually happened is indeed the core melted and got about half an inch into the seven inch containment vessel, cooled off, hardened, and that was the end of the incident. Nobody was hurt and it was instructive. So incidents like that have not occurred since. The safety record of the nuclear industry again, that turned up in my research - is impeccable.

SIMON: Quite about vulnerability to terrorism?

Mr. BRAND: Boy, I think it would take a pretty dumb terrorist.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. BRAND: There's so many other vulnerabilities. I've been evolved in some of the researcher that intelligence community the last few years. And one of the things that happened after 9/11 is every nerd I know, including me, started figuring out various ways that we could bring down America, and there are so many - one could be grateful that they have not been explored by actual terrorists. Nuclear is way down the list; its really hard to do something terroristic with the way nuclear power is done.

SIMON: Stewart Brands new book - Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto. He joined us from KQED in San Francisco. Nice to be with you, sir.

Mr. BRAND: Thank you, sir.

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