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More nuclear can drive more economic growth

Mel Buckner

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An abundance of nuclear-generated electricity has made a huge difference in the economic and environmental well-being of South Carolina.

From 2013 to 2015, the seven S.C. reactors operated on average about 92 percent of the time; that's up from about 60 percent when they first units began operating in the early 1970s. These huge gains in electricity production have helped drive economic growth in South Carolina and will in years to come.

The Three Mile Island accident in Pennsylvania in 1979 gave the industry a much-needed wake-up call. It made the industry recognize how serious the consequences were of not having the proper respect for nuclear safety. After the accident, Duke Power President Bill Lee spearheaded an industry-wide effort to address deficiencies in utility management, emergency planning and nuclear regulation. Among other improvements, this led to creation of the Atlanta-based Institute of Nuclear Power Operations, which has made the industry look at itself critically.

The upshot is that there hasn't been a serious nuclear accident in the United States since Three Mile Island. This stellar safety record has silenced many of the politicians who had opposed nuclear power. And some leading environmental groups now realize that the battle against climate change requires the use of nuclear power, which provides more than 60 percent of the nation's carbon-free electricity. But much more needs to be done to advance nuclear power.

A good start would be to renew for a second time the operating licenses of existing plants so they can operate for up to 80 years instead of 60 years. Some utilities have announced plans to seek such approval from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

And efforts need to be stepped up to develop the next generation of small modular and advanced reactors, in order to improve and expand the use of nuclear power in South Carolina and nationally.

Mel Buckner

North Augusta