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Nuclear our best option, premier says

'No major nuclear accidents in Ontario in more than two decades, McGuinty notes

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FROM CANADIAN PRESS

Nuclear power may be the best option to fulfil Ontario's future electricity needs, despite its obvious downsides including Chernobyl-type accidents and radioactive waste, Premier Dalton McGuinty said Wednesday.

Natural gas is too expensive, wind power is unreliable, coal plants pollute the air and Ontario's hydroelectric potential has largely been maxed out — leaving nuclear power expansions "on the table" for the province, McGuinty said.

"There is nothing that is neat and tidy by way of a solution to our energy challenges," McGuinty said when asked about the risks associated with nuclear power, including the devastating Chernobyl accident in 1986 that led to thousands of deaths.

"But I think we should look at our particular history in this country," McGuinty added, noting that there have been no major nuclear accidents in Ontario.

McGuinty later said it's "irresponsible" to compare Chernobyl with Canada's Candu nuclear technology anyway.

"We've had (nuclear) technology in place here for some 30 years. There has been nothing like, nothing even approaching like, what happened unfortunately in Chernobyl," he said inside the Ontario legislature.

Next week marks the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown. The catastrophe killed thousands of people, mostly in Russia, but also in Ukraine and Belarus.

Energy Minister Donna Cansfield is about to issue a formal response to recommendations in December that called for \$40 billion to construct or replace up to 12,400 megawatts of nuclear power in Ontario — requiring 12 or more new nuclear reactor units in the province.

The premier denied New Democrat accusations that the Liberals are waiting until after the Chernobyl anniversary to respond.

Critics say there have been close calls at Ontario's nuclear stations, including two incidents at the Pickering station — a coolant leak in 1983, and brief problems with computers that operate a reactor in 1991. In both cases, safety systems kicked in as they should to prevent potentially devastating accidents.

But industry expert Tom Adams called those occurrences "near misses" that should have deterred governments from ever considering nuclear again.

"To use an air traffic control analogy. . . when a Cessna sweeps in front of a 747 and they miss each other by a



DICK LOEK/TORONTO STAR FILE

Nuclear power may be the best option to fulfil Ontario's future electricity needs, despite its obvious downsides — including Chernobyl-type accidents and the need to store radioactive waste, Premier Dalton McGuinty said Wednesday. The Pickering A nuclear generating station is pictured here.

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few hundred metres, the air traffic controllers don't say, 'Oh well, that was nothing.' They say, 'We're never going to let that happen again.' "

China and India have embarked on nuclear energy programs in recent years. But Adams noted that the western world is largely shying away from nuclear plants with the notable exception of Finland, which is constructing a nuclear station to reduce that country's reliance on Russian gas.

This week, a Greenpeace report predicted that 270,000 cancers will have been caused by Chornobyl fallout, 93,000 of them fatal.

"Nuclear power is just as dangerous for Canada in 2006 as it was for Ukraine in 1986," said Greenpeace Canada's Dave Martin. "A catastrophic accident has a low probability, but devastating consequences."

Martin said safety risks are rising as Ontario's existing nuclear plants age.

McGuinty acknowledged nuclear energy isn't without its problems.

"The downside is, of course, that it does produce nuclear waste. The upside is, we can contain it. The downside, again, is, we've got to contain it for a thousand years."

But McGuinty has long argued that nuclear has the ability to generate clean, affordable and reliable baseload electricity compared to its alternatives.

The Conservatives say the Liberals are ignoring coal, an abundant commodity that produces cheap electricity. The government has promised to close Ontario's four remaining coal plants by the end of 2009 due to air pollution concerns.

Nuclear stations can take a decade or more to build and past projects have gone billions of dollars over budget. The original cost to construct Ontario's Darlington nuclear station, located 70 kilometres east of Toronto, tripled to some \$14 billion during the 1980s.

Sources have said the Liberals are discussing the potential of a major expansion at Darlington.

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