Safer Nukes Now?

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We may have power-hungry artificial intelligence operations to thank for the fact that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has issued a permit for the "first commercial reactor" that it has approved for construction "in nearly a decade."

It's also "the first approval for a non-light water reactor in more than 40 years."

National Review characterizes the construction permit as the first to be issued by the NRC in its 52-year history "for an advanced nuclear reactor design."

TerraPower subsidiary US SFR Owner has one more regulatory hurdle. (SFR: sodium-cooled fast reactor.) It must apply separately for an operating license before the projected 345-megawatt electric plant, once built, can begin operating. After that, the way will have been paved for more such plants.

Jeff Terry, with the Illinois Institute of Technology, praises the reactor's cheaper and safer design. "The advantage of a sodium fast reactor is that it's cheaper to build because it's not pressurized. So you don't have to worry about loss of pressure. If you have an accident, the sodium fuel will harden and solidify. It's a nice, stable, passively safe design."

He says that the technology available now "helps the safety of a reactor which was incredibly safe 30 years ago."

Efforts have been made to build a sodium-cooled reactor before. In the 1980s, the Department of Energy developed a prototype, and it passed safety tests with flying colors. But the Clinton administration ended the program for reasons that Terry summarizes as "sheer stupidity."

We should prefer sheer wisdom.

This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.