

UAE inches closer to nuclear milestone

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The Government begins talks with international contractors about the management the UAE's nuclear energy programme. Newscom

The country has moved closer to becoming the first Arab nation to exploit atomic energy after opening talks with international contractors over the appointment of a project manager, the Government's nuclear company announced yesterday.

The Federal Government has published a policy document outlining plans to build a fleet of atomic reactors designed to fuel economic growth for the next generation and diversify from fossil fuels.

The Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, which is tasked with implementing the programme, met contractors this week with a view to appointing a managing agent to oversee the design, engineering and construction of the reactors.

The agent will not build the reactors, but act as overseer for a host of other contractors involved in the multibillion-dollar project.

“The meeting took place in Abu Dhabi and was part of a prequalifying process for companies that may eventually qualify to tender for the opportunity to perform the role of ‘managing agent’,” the company said.

Amec, the British construction company, said it was one of nine companies present at the briefing.

Faced with an expected shortage of natural gas and possible global taxes on carbon emissions, officials hope to rely on atomic energy to produce a third of the nation's power within a decade.

The Government has yet to give the programme the final go-ahead, but it has already signed nuclear co-operation agreements with France, Britain and the US.

Five other nuclear powers – South Korea, Germany, China, Japan and Russia – are also expected to sign partnerships to give the broadest possible diplomatic backing, as well as access to the best technology and expertise.

To demonstrate the Government's peaceful objectives, it has promised to forgo any enrichment of uranium and intends to import the reactor fuel from foreign sources.

By contrast, Iran's nuclear programme involves enrichment, which could be used to make nuclear weapons. Iran says its programme is purely peaceful, but it has faced a growing raft of sanctions and threats from Western powers.

The Government has promised the highest levels of transparency to ensure global backing for its programme, which could produce its first kilowatt in 2016.

Several other Gulf countries have announced similar plans, but none is as advanced as the programme here.

The Government is expected to give the green light to the scheme before the end of this year, with a view to awarding construction contracts next year.

It intends to use a single reactor design for the entire programme to optimise investments in training, maintenance, fuelling and technology, from a field of about half a dozen light-water reactor designs.

The Government has yet to detail its plans for the storage of radioactive waste.

It has already begun to work with the International Atomic Energy Agency and allocated US\$100 million (Dh367m) to form the Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation, which is serving as the main organisation to implement the programme.

The UAE is already a signatory to nuclear non-proliferation protocols and is expected to sign another nine protocols and commitments as it prepares to move ahead.