

# Obama's Department of Fracking and Nukes

by KARL GROSSMAN 3/5/13 <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/03/05/the-department-of-fracking-and-nukes/>

With the nomination of Ernest Moniz to be the next U.S. secretary of Energy, President Barack Obama has selected a man who is not only a booster of nuclear power but a big proponent of fracking, too. What happened to Obama's call for "clean" energy in his 2013 State of the Union address?

Moniz, a physicist and director of the MIT Energy Initiative, heavily financed by energy industry giants including BP and Chevron, has long advocated nuclear power. He has continued arguing for it despite the multiple meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant complex, maintaining that the disaster in Japan should not cause a stop in nuclear power development.

In a 2011 essay in *Foreign Affairs* magazine titled "Why We Still Need Nuclear Power," Moniz wrote: "In the years following the major accidents at Three Mile Island in 1979 and Chernobyl in 1986, nuclear power fell out of favor, and some countries applied the brakes to their nuclear programs. In the last decade, however, it began experiencing something of a renaissance....But the movement lost momentum in March, when a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and the massive tsunami it triggered devastated Japan's Fukushima nuclear power plant...The event caused widespread public doubts about the safety of nuclear power to resurface. Germany announced an accelerated shutdown of its nuclear reactors, with broad public support." But, [insisted Moniz](#), "It would be a mistake...to let Fukushima cause governments to abandon nuclear power and its benefits."

Moniz went on: "Nuclear power's track record of providing clean and reliable electricity compares favorably with other energy sources." *Foreign Affairs* is the publication of the Council on Foreign Relations, which regards itself an elite grouping of government officials, industry executives, scientists and media figures. Moniz is a member.

He also said in the essay that "the public needs to be convinced that nuclear power is safe." As U.S. energy secretary, this will likely be a main thrust of Moniz. He would endeavor to lead the 16,000-employee Department of Energy with a budget of \$27 billion for 2013 in trying to get the American public to believe in what decades ago the U.S. government promoted as "Citizen Atom."

Likewise, when it comes to hydraulic fracturing or fracking—the process that uses hundreds of toxic chemicals and massive amounts of waste under high pressure to fracture shale formations to release gas captured in them—Moniz [told the Senate Energy Committee](#) in 2011 that the water and air pollution risks associated with fracking were "challenging but manageable" with appropriate regulation and oversight.

Fracking also can lead to radioactive contamination. Many shale formations contain Radium-226 and other radioactive poisons unleashed in the fracking process.

Erich Pica, president of [Friends of the Earth](#), declared after Obama's nomination of Moniz on Monday, that the group "has grave concerns about Mr. Moniz's history of support for both nuclear power and fracking." Pica described Moniz's support of nuclear power despite "the unfolding catastrophe" of Fukushima as "frightening." On Moniz being "a big booster of fracking," Pica said this has been "seemingly without due regard for the environmental and public health risks and impacts."

Nevertheless, in Washington Monday, Obama, describing Moniz as a "brilliant scientist," said: "Most importantly, Ernie knows that we can produce more energy and grow our economy while still taking care of our air, our water and our climate. And so I could not be more pleased to have Ernie join us."

It's not as if Obama wasn't warned about Moniz.

For weeks, as reports spread that Moniz would be replacing Obama's first energy secretary, the also staunchly pro-nuclear power Steven Chu, former director of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, the organization Food & Water Watch circulated an online petition for people to send to Obama. It stated: "This is not the person we need as our country's Energy Secretary at this critical moment. We need a visionary leader who can enact policies that move us away from intensive fossil fuel extraction, such as fracking, and toward a renewable energy future." Other groups circulated similar petitions.

And it's not as if Moniz was unfamiliar to Obama, or Washington. He has been a member of both Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology and Obama's Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future. And he was an undersecretary in the Department of Energy in the Clinton administration.

Obama's stance as president on nuclear power has been a change from his position as candidate Obama. "I start off with the premise that nuclear energy is not optimal and so I am not a nuclear energy proponent," Obama said [campaigning in Iowa](#) on 2007. He went on that unless the "nuclear industry can show that they can produce clean, safe energy without enormous subsidies from the U.S. government, I don't think that's the best option. I am much more interested in solar and wind and bio-diesel and strategies [for] alternative fuels." As he [told the editorial board](#) of the *Keene Sentinel* in New Hampshire that year: "I don't think there's anything that we inevitably dislike about nuclear power. We just dislike the fact that it might blow up and irradiate us and kill us. That's the problem."

Nevertheless, in his first State of the Union speech he spoke about "building a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants in this country" and kept repeating that pitch. But in recent times, in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, Obama has increasingly avoided using the words nuclear power—he didn't refer to it at all in his State of the Union address this January. Instead he has let Chu, and will let, if he is confirmed, Moniz, do the talking about nuclear power and pushing it as an energy source for the United States.

As to fracking, in his 2013 State of the Union address, Obama said "the natural gas boom has led to cleaner power and greater energy independence. That's why my administration will keep cutting red tape and speeding up new oil and gas permits."