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Plans for nuclear power plant in Central Valley

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A prominent French engineering company will help develop a nuclear power plant in California's Central Valley, even though state law forbids such facilities.

The company, Areva, said Tuesday that it has signed a letter of intent with a group of investors trying to build one or two nuclear reactors in either Fresno County or Madera County. The company will work with the investors to pick a location for the plant and apply for federal permits.

But the project still faces a high hurdle. California law forbids the construction of nuclear power plants in the state until the federal government opens a permanent storage facility for the waste. Legislation to overturn the ban died in the Assembly in 2007.

John Hutson, president of the investors group behind the project, said the group will apply for operating permits from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission even though the state ban remains in place. Public attitudes toward nuclear power are shifting, he said, and the 1976 moratorium may not last.

"We think the moratorium is going to take care of itself," said Hutson, president of Fresno Nuclear Energy Group, which was formed three years ago.

Hutson sees nuclear power as a key tool for lowering greenhouse gas emissions and fighting global warming, one of the state government's top priorities. Smaller measures, such as capturing methane from dairy farms, won't solve the problem, he said.

"You're not going to address global warming by addressing cow flatulence," Hutson said. "You're going to do it with nuclear power."

California has two nuclear power plants - Diablo Canyon on the Central Coast and San Onofre between Los Angeles and San Diego. Together, they produce roughly 15 percent of the state's electricity, according to the California Energy Commission.

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