

Issue Assessment Report:

The Potential Development of a Small Modular Reactor in Colorado Springs



**Figure 1.** A full-size mock up of NuScale Power’s small modular reactor (SMR) design constructed for engineers to study the working interior.<sup>1</sup>

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This issue assessment report examines Colorado Springs Utilities' (CSU) consideration to add a small modular reactor (SMR) to their energy portfolio after a recommendation from their Utility Policy Advisory Committee (UPAC) to further diversify their energy portfolio and meet the energy needs of Colorado Springs' residents.

### **Background**

#### *Adding Nuclear Power to Colorado's Energy Portfolio*

In March of 2025 The Colorado General Assembly passed House Bill 25-1040 which amended the state's definition of 'clean energy sources' to include nuclear energy.<sup>2</sup> The bill was signed into law by Governor Jared Polis to help the state meet its rising energy demands while also remaining committed to the state's 2050 emission reduction goals.<sup>3</sup> Environmental groups were against the bill due to its potential to take funding away from other clean energy projects like wind and solar that are not as dangerous, use less water, and do not produce radioactive waste.<sup>4</sup> However, many supporters of the bill claim it has the potential to replace coal power in the state.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The Advancement of Small Modular Reactors*

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) classifies SMRs as "advanced reactors that produce electricity of up to 300 [megawatts]."<sup>6</sup> Nuclear technology has advanced rapidly over the last few decades, with SMRs becoming one of the more efficient and commercially available options.<sup>7</sup> Various universities across the country have conducted extensive research on SMRs, with energy corporations like NuScale power as the developers.<sup>8</sup> These reactors are designed with daily production reaching up to 7.2 megawatt-hours per module per day.<sup>9</sup> SMRs, like other nuclear reactor technologies, use water as a resource input in the process of making

energy.<sup>10</sup> Water usage for an individual SMR averages around 300 gallons per megawatt-hour, equivalent to roughly 2,178 acre-feet per year, only 3.11% of Colorado Springs' total annual water use of 70,000 acre-feet of water.<sup>11</sup> While there are currently no SMRs in operation within the United States, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) issued their first SMR design certification to NuScale Power in 2023, which may cause an increase of SMR project proposals across the country.<sup>12</sup> The progression of scaled nuclear and SMRs is a response to the rising costs seen across the United States, with residential prices expected to rise as much as eighteen percent from 2022 to 2026.<sup>13</sup>

### *Rising Energy Demand in Colorado Springs*

The demand for energy in Colorado Springs is rising as their population continues to grow, becoming the second most populated city in CO with a population of 502,306 in 2024.<sup>14</sup> It is now the largest city by land mass with an area of 202 square miles.<sup>15</sup> While Colorado Springs and other communities across the state have adopted renewable energy technologies to meet their demands, energy developers have drastically increased prices for wind and solar to account for tariffs proposed by the Trump administration, resulting in costs being fifty to sixty percent higher than expected.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, large data centers, like Microsoft, may plan to open sites in Colorado Springs in the near future, resulting in a need for a greater energy supply.<sup>17</sup> CSU has attempted to address these cost challenges as local residents are already paying high rates, so they are currently “assessing alternative paths” for energy sources to deliver affordable and stable energy to Colorado Springs.<sup>18</sup>

## **II. INFRASTRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS**

UPAC is recommending CSU build the SMR on Clear Spring Ranch (CSR), a 4,000-acre multi-use property twenty miles south of Colorado Springs in El Paso County.<sup>19</sup> There are

industrial and rural areas of the ranch, with I-25 running down the middle and a road system with parking lots connecting the different facilities on the property.<sup>20</sup> The property runs alongside Fountain River with tributaries of the river running through the property.<sup>21</sup> The Ranch contains a 930-acre park/open space, a Resource Recovery Facility, a ten megawatt solar park, the Richard D. Nixon combination natural gas and coal power plant, and a Coal Combustion Residual Landfill. On one side of I-25 the property has a public open space and on the other has the industrial facilities.<sup>22</sup>

The open-space park is owned by CSU and managed by El Paso County Parks and Recreation.<sup>23</sup> This area is open to the public with hiking and mountain biking trails, picnic tables, restrooms, horseback riding trails, educational displays about the local ecology, and a parking lot.<sup>24</sup> There is also active farming throughout the park.<sup>25</sup> The Fountain river runs along the open space and has a flowrate of sixty-one cubic feet per second.<sup>26</sup> Halfway through the ranch there is a diversion of the Fountain river, called Little Fountain, that cuts directly through the property. This river and its tributary are not used as a water source despite running through the property. CSU uses on-site wells for all water needs. These wells may be able to supply the SMR without additional upgrades if the plant stays below a certain size.<sup>27</sup>

The Resource Recovery Facility is part of CSU's wastewater system that is used to treat biosolids from two wastewater recovery facilities: Las Vegas Street and J.D. Phillips Water Resource Recovery Facilities.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, there is a ten megawatt PV Solar Park spanning 156 acres of CSR that has been online since 2016, with NextEra Energy Resources as its owner and developer.<sup>29</sup> This facility helps CSU meet its commitments to renewable energy and the power generated from the project is sold to CSU under a power purchase agreement for a period of twenty-five years. This ensures CSU can anticipate long-term supply and demand of

renewable energy sources. The SMR project will need similar long-term planning to ensure its success due to expensive upfront costs.

CSU planned to close the Ray D. Nixon Power Plant at the same time as the Martin Drake Power Plant in 2022 to meet the EPA's renewable energy goals for utility companies.<sup>30</sup> The CEO of CSU debated with the EPA to extend the life of the power plant to keep the cost of electricity for residents low.<sup>31</sup> The power plant's Coal Combustion Residual Landfill then collects and stores the non-volatile fly ash, bottom ash, waste salt, spent sandblasting media, sediment, and flue gas desulfurization waste from the Nixon plant.<sup>32</sup> There is no definitive plan for how radioactive waste will be stored. A recent study revealed that SMRs and other advanced nuclear technologies have the potential to create more nuclear waste than large reactors, increasing spent fuel and waste production by "factors of two to thirty."<sup>33</sup> According to David Longrie, CSU's Manager of Energy Resource Planning and Innovation, the waste will most likely be stored on site based on direction from other nuclear projects with similar paradigms that adhere to nuclear permitting requirements.<sup>34</sup> It is common for countries that produce nuclear power to lack the infrastructure necessary for the long-term storage of nuclear waste.<sup>35</sup>

CSR has extensive infrastructure that will ease the development of the project, such as connections to major roads, transmission lines, open space for construction and operation, and parking lots for power plant workers. Additionally, CSR has access to a water source, although this is only necessary for some SMR technologies. Building the SMR near the existing coal plant will also help CSU optimize existing grid components.<sup>36</sup> Upgrades may need to be made to the Nixon substation where they will connect the SMR's electricity into if the plant reaches a certain size; however, the size of the SMR is still under consideration. Additionally, adding industrial infrastructure, like power plants, to areas that are already being used for industrial purposes is

usually more accepted by the public.<sup>37</sup> This may not be the case for a nuclear project considering nuclear has always been a controversial topic.

While CSU has acquired much of the necessary infrastructure to successfully support SMR deployment, nuclear projects have much higher upfront costs than other energy facilities, with the overnight costs averaging around \$6,041 per kilowatt of power.<sup>38</sup> SMRs tend to be even more expensive than other nuclear energy projects, with overnight costs averaging around \$10,000 per kilowatt in the European Union.<sup>39</sup> While there have been attempts to deploy successful SMR projects in the U.S., insufficient funding has led to many projects being abandoned. For example, the Carbon Free-Power Project, developed by the Utah Associated Municipal Power Systems (UAMPS) and Nuscale Power, was developed to build NuScale SMRs in Idaho from 2025 to 2029.<sup>40</sup> However, both parties involved announced that the project did not have support to continue because cost projections doubled after the Department of Energy awarded \$1.4 billion over a span of ten years.<sup>41</sup> These cost projects resulted in declining support from both customers and investors, leading to the ultimate failure of the project.<sup>42</sup> Future SMR projects may be likely to fail unless developers have secured funding two-times the project cost-estimate.

### **III. POLITICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

To potentially construct and operate an SMR in Colorado Springs, CSU has to seek approval from and collaboration with governing bodies on the federal, state, and local levels. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) holds ultimate jurisdiction over the oversight, licensing, and operation of nuclear projects in the United States.<sup>43</sup> Like any other nuclear project, the NRC must first approve of the reactor design before project developers are able to use them.<sup>44</sup> The NRC has only granted certification to Nuscale Power's 'NuScale US600' SMR design, with

many designs from other companies pending approval.<sup>45</sup> Without adopting certified SMR design, CSU's project cannot move forward. The NRC requires a Safety Analysis Report for the proposed project, including the SMR design information and "comprehensive data" on CSR as the proposed reactor site.<sup>46</sup> This also means the project will be reviewed under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) by both the NRC and the Department of Energy (DOE) to ensure the project complies with federal regulations, requiring steps to be taken towards an Environmental Assessment (EA) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).<sup>47</sup> These assessments will determine whether or not CSU is allowed to use CSR as the SMR site.

Colorado Senator Larry Liston, a primary sponsor of H.B. 25-1040, is a resident of Colorado Springs and represents Senate District 10 in the state.<sup>48</sup> He is a large supporter of nuclear energy deployment in the state, which signals that CSU has a political ally that could aid in greenlighting many state actions required to construct and operate an SMR in the city. Senator Liston also sponsored Senate Bill 25-120 concerned with "promoting workforce development opportunities in Colorado's nuclear sector" that would largely benefit CSU's transition to nuclear energy.<sup>49</sup> While the bill failed to pass, Senator Liston still has access to political power that could accelerate CSU's SMR project. Due to his standing and political credibility, Senator Liston can ensure the project meets all of Colorado's nuclear energy policies. Support from Senator Liston may also enhance local support for the project. CSU is required to submit a 'specific radioactive materials license' application to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) before handling any radioactive materials, including "byproduct, source, and special nuclear material."<sup>50</sup> The department has not issued a formal statement regarding new nuclear energy policies or regulations for potential advanced reactor projects, so it is unclear whether or not there will be future CDPHE requirements for nuclear energy projects.

Because CSR is located in El Paso County, CSU is subject to the authority of El Paso County's Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD). While the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has authority over the siting and permitting of this nuclear project, Colorado's 1041 regulations based on H.B. 74-1041 allow local governments to maintain control over development projects that are deemed "areas and activities of state interest," which includes the "conduct of nuclear detonations."<sup>51</sup> This means that CSU must obtain a 1041 Permit from El Paso County's DPCD, according to the county's Land Development Code under Chapter five of Appendix B, which states that "no person may engage in development, including construction, expansion, reoperation, relocation or other significant change in use of such activity wholly or partially within unincorporated El Paso County without first obtaining a permit pursuant to these Regulations."<sup>52</sup> Even though the NRC oversees all nuclear projects and safety regulations in the U.S., El Paso County can deny the issuance of permits to CSU if they determine that CSR is not a feasible location for the SMR project.

CSU's actions on Clear Spring Ranch are also subject to El Paso County's Land Development Code, which includes permitting and zoning for potential development projects.<sup>53</sup> After an extensive review of public records, it is unclear whether or not El Paso County has designated CSR as an industrial zoning site. Sites with energy facilities that generate less than 50 MW and sites that handle hazardous waste are currently zoned as either an I-2 or I-3 Industrial Zoning Districts or as an Obsolete Zoning District.<sup>54</sup> If the current zoning of CSR does not allow for hazardous waste storage and management, the site will either have to be rezoned or CSU will have to find another location for the reactor site. In February of 2025, UPAC completed preliminary research on SMRs and presented to the Utilities Board detailed findings about SMR technology, local site selection, and regulatory requirements.<sup>55</sup> The next steps involve the City

Council’s formal decision-making to “approve the sale, conveyance, or lease of substantial parts of utilities systems and water rights” based on supermajority.<sup>56</sup>

SMRs are very water intensive, so it is crucial that CSU has a large enough water supply to support the project. CSU’s current water portfolio includes water rights in the Blue River Basin from 1929 and 1948.<sup>57</sup> Through the utility’s Continental Hoosier System, CSU sources water from the Colorado River and the South Platte River basins into the Arkansas River Basin.<sup>58</sup> CSU is currently in the process of expanding the Montgomery Reservoir in order to increase its water capacity by over 8,000 acre-feet, which would allow CSU “an additional annual yield of 4,000 acre-feet,” which is roughly 1.3 million gallons of water.<sup>59</sup> However, CSU must first obtain local, state, and federal permits required before construction on the reservoir can begin, including 1041 permits and other project permits from Summit and Park counties.<sup>60</sup> CSU has estimated that this project will take up to five years to complete with construction beginning between 2028 and 2030.<sup>61</sup> CSU must work with local and state policymakers to align the Montgomery Reservoir expansion project with the SMR proposal in order to secure the water supply necessary to meet safety regulations required for SMR deployment. Without the necessary water supply, it is likely the project could be delayed for another three to five years.

#### **IV. SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

CSU is a community-owned utility service, meaning that local residents are viable stakeholders whose opinions can determine whether or not CSU moves forward with projects involving nuclear power. The Northwest Colorado Energy Initiative (NCEI) conducted a public opinion survey in 2024 with roughly 400 respondents, finding that over sixty percent “strongly favor” the use of nuclear energy to provide electricity and around sixty-one percent “strongly agree” that more nuclear power plants should be built in the future.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, sixty-four

percent of respondents were aware of SMR technologies, with over fifty percent describing the technology as safe, cost effective, reliable, and clean.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, the NCEI survey does not include participants from Colorado Springs, highlighting a large gap that must be addressed if CSU furthers the development of this project. UPAC member Larry Barrett reported that “a recent utility survey showed twenty-five percent customer support for nuclear power” in Colorado Springs, but no further details about the survey were provided.<sup>64</sup> This lack of information further decreases public trust of CSU as these claims are not backed by evidence that can be viewed by the general public. UPAC further recommended that CSU develop a “comprehensive community education campaign” to increase community support for nuclear power development.<sup>65</sup> While this education campaign would allow CSU to connect with Colorado Springs’ residents and potentially increase local acceptance, support from local environmental groups could give CSU further credibility for adopting this SMR project.

Historically, many prominent environmental organizations have had negative perceptions of nuclear energy, especially the Sierra Club, stating in 1974 that they “oppose the licensing, construction, and operation of new nuclear reactors utilizing the fission process.”<sup>66</sup> The Colorado chapter of the Sierra Club testified in opposition to the passing of H.B. 25-1040, along with representatives from other environmental groups located in Colorado.<sup>67</sup> There could be further opposition from the public if CSU pursues this SMR project, especially since local residents are likely to trust the expertise of these groups over CSU regarding environmental impacts. Local advocacy groups are likely to build connections and trust with Colorado Springs’ locals through education events. This could encourage public rejection of nuclear power and erode public trust of CSU for considering a nuclear power project. Public hearings would allow residents to feel included in decision making by providing honest feedback on the project proposal. Hosting

informational sessions would also help CSU educate locals about SMRs and how they differ from large-scale reactors. Without high rates of community acceptance, a complete shut down of the project is very likely and CSU may need to consider alternative sources to meet their energy needs.

The acceptance of nuclear energy is often controversial due to conflicting benefits and challenges that make it difficult to reach a general consensus. One of the biggest social advantages of adopting SMR technology is the production of carbon-free electricity, which can improve air quality for surrounding communities.<sup>68</sup> In April of 2025, the American Lung Association released their annual “State of the Air” report, naming Colorado Springs as the 23rd most polluted city in the nation for ozone and particle pollution.<sup>69</sup> The air quality is reportedly causing asthma attacks in children and respiratory sickness in adults, as well as low birth weights for infants.<sup>70</sup> By investing in SMR technology, Colorado Springs can reduce air pollution caused by fossil fuel use for energy production. Though this project will not eliminate all emissions in Colorado Springs, it has the ability to improve the health of residents. If public health improves, locals in Colorado Springs may be in support of additional SMR deployment to replace coal and natural gas plants. Additionally, CSU’s advanced SMR development could create additional jobs in manufacturing, construction, and operations, further stimulating the city’s economy in addition to federal and state tax revenues.<sup>71</sup> There is also a potential for increased representation by labor unions as 19% of nuclear energy workers were protected by labor unions in 2023, a much higher average than other energy jobs.<sup>72</sup>

One of the biggest challenges with nuclear energy is waste disposal and management. Most nuclear plants store their spent fuel on-site in either storage pools or dry casks as there are no permanent facilities for high-level radioactive waste operating in the United States.<sup>73</sup>

However, on-site waste storage can leak from the reactor sites, releasing radiation and creating potential health risks for surrounding communities.<sup>74</sup> In 2011, NRC records revealed that forty-eight of sixty-five reactor sites in the U.S. leaked radioactive materials into surrounding communities, with some contaminating drinking water sources.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, marginalized communities are often not included in land-use decision-making, especially regarding the siting and negotiation processes involving storage waste facilities which causes disproportionate health impacts within these populations.<sup>76</sup> Uranium mining, as a result of a rise in nuclear energy demand, has left surrounding communities with severe health risks. The Navajo Nation has over 500 abandoned uranium mines on the reservation, and community members exposed to unsafe mining practices are facing extremely high rates of cancer.<sup>77</sup> While SMR deployment would not necessarily lead to a rise in local uranium mining, nuclear energy development has received immense public pushback due to both physical and emotional impacts on surrounding communities. Without total public inclusion, CSU may receive immense pushback from local communities, especially those located near CSR. CSU has previously faced negative feedback from the public due to the poor management and operation of the Martin Drake Power Plant, which may have eroded local trust in the utility.<sup>78</sup> Generally, the community acceptance of this SMR project heavily depends on how well the locals are informed.

## **V. INFORMATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Different media channels like public radio stations KRCC and KOAA, television stations Springs TV and KKTV, and social media Facebook or X can inspire stakeholders to engage directly in public comment and feedback on the local level. A query through FCCs public broadcasting stations database reveals that roughly six radio stations produce content related to local programming, news, or events.<sup>79</sup> Reporting for these stations can include stories on

Colorado Springs' Electric Integrated Resource Plan (EIRP), cost increases for ratepayers, and recent changes to proposed projects and timelines like that of CSU's SMR.<sup>80</sup> These stations report on the formal disclosure of energy and utility planning released by CSU, UPAC, and the City of Colorado Springs in the form EIRPs that illustrate broad long term energy goals, and operating and financial budget for energy usage within a year.<sup>81</sup> The most prominent newspaper in the region is most likely *The Colorado Springs Gazette*, which is the second most popular newspaper in Colorado with an average daily circulation of over 93,000 readers.<sup>82</sup> Regional radio stations like KRCC are very popular as well, with thirteen radio signals across the southern region of the state reaching up to an average of 70,000 regional listeners per week.<sup>83</sup>

In 2024 the City of Colorado Springs partnered with a private survey research firm to perform a community satisfaction survey of over 600 residents which showed that roughly forty percent believe balancing growth and available resources was the most important concern for the city going forward.<sup>84</sup> The City of Colorado Springs and CSU have used this feedback to provide regular updates regarding energy projects on social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn. CSU has approximately 20,000 followers each on Facebook and LinkedIn, indicating that many residents of Colorado Springs would be likely to interact with posts about upcoming energy projects.<sup>85</sup>

These information pathways relay news and events to a swath of different interest groups with significant representation from military members, defense contractors, high tech companies, and religious groups. The Christian community in Colorado Springs includes networks of over 500 ministries, reaching thousands of local residents through mailing lists, community events, church services, and social media.<sup>86</sup> Dirk Draper, the CEO of the Colorado Spring Regional Business Alliance, has referred to religious organization activity as a “vibrant industry cluster”,

where an estimated five percent of the area's workforce is contained within faith-based organizations.<sup>87</sup> These groups may compete with traditional public meeting spaces, broadcast spaces, and socio-political conversations. Colorado Springs also has a large population of active military and veteran populations, with roughly 45,000 active-duty members and nearly 100,000 veterans.<sup>88</sup> The military presence in Colorado Springs includes Peterson Space Force Base, the United States Air Force Academy, and Fort Carson. These facilities play a major role as a communication hub among and between service members, families, and local organizations. Additionally, these facilities often have a very significant energy demand and usually rely on civilian energy infrastructure for their power, which puts a large strain on the local energy grid.<sup>89</sup>

In January of 2023, CSU began providing electricity and natural gas to Fort Carson, which has modernized their infrastructure, increased service reliability, and provided lower utility costs for the base.<sup>90</sup> However, these facilities often have a very significant energy demand and rely on civilian energy infrastructure for their power.<sup>91</sup> As energy demand increases, military bases have considered deploying on-site alternative energy sources to prevent straining civilian energy grids.<sup>92</sup> For example, Fort Carson has recently partnered with CSU to install a photovoltaic solar facility on-site to address their energy needs.<sup>93</sup> SMRs are also being considered to power U.S. military bases, however new research has revealed that "U.S. military bases have limited capacity to turn to nuclear power as a backup energy source," especially since potential radiation leakage could increase the vulnerability of military bases.<sup>94</sup> The opinions of military leaders in Colorado Springs has the potential to influence local land use planning since public officials rely on military personnel to help them "understand the effects of incompatible development on quality of life in communities and on military operations."<sup>95</sup> Local military

personnel may be heavily involved in the land use planning process for this SMR project, especially since many bases in the surrounding area are in collaboration with CSU.

Residents also have the opportunity to attend City Council and Utilities Board meetings; typically occurring in the evening, these public meetings offer an array of interaction with the public.<sup>96</sup> City Council meetings can be attended in person on the third floor of City Hall, but citizens can also watch virtually through the City's website, Facebook live, and several cable channels via Springs TV.<sup>97</sup> It's worth noting that roughly ninety-four percent of the community has access to the internet, and one of the few ways to interact with the meeting include public comment via the CSU website, emails sent to specific entities like UPAC and City Council, and in-person comment.<sup>98</sup> Agendas can be received ahead of the meetings through an electronic newsletter offered by the City titled "At the Dais."<sup>99</sup> If residents prefer a higher level overview instead of the specific meeting notes and agenda, they can subscribe to Colorado Springs Weekly, an email newsletter that shares important information, as well as events and news in Colorado Springs more broadly.

## Notes

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