

By Gabriela Baczynska and Patryk Wasilewski

WARSAW, June 23 (Reuters) - Poland must find a strategic investor next year if it is to bring its first nuclear power plant into operation in 2020 as planned, the official in charge of the project said on Tuesday.

Hanna Trojanowska, named in May as Poland's government commissioner for nuclear energy, told Reuters she hoped the necessary legal framework for the construction and operation of the plant would be completed by 2011. "We would like the new laws to be in force as of the start of 2011 at the latest," she said in an interview.

Poland, which now relies on highly-polluting coal for more than 90 percent of its energy needs, wants to diversify its sources of energy and has chosen its biggest power producer, Polska Grupa Energetyczna (PGE), to lead the nuclear plant project. "According to PGE's plans, the strategic investor is to be chosen in the second half of 2010 to be able to meet the 2020 target. The target is very ambitious," she said, adding that the location of the site would be chosen in 2012. "The location must be picked two years before the start of the construction work, that is in 2012," Trojanowska said.

PGE has said it is aiming for 6,000 megawatts of nuclear power capacity. The investor would supply the necessary technology and know-how, but the ministry wants to manufacture as many elements of the plant as possible in Poland to benefit the economy.

Trojanowska, who is preparing Poland's strategy for nuclear energy development, which is due to be ready in 12 months at the earliest, said it is up to PGE to choose the investor. But no serious talks can take place yet due to the lack of necessary legislation, she added. "The strategy will not recommend a particular supplier of technology, but regulations will specify the criteria for the selection. It's difficult to negotiate with such an investor when the laws in Poland still don't exist," she added.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Donald Tusk said Poland needed at least two nuclear sites, with the first bloc operational in 2020.

A number of countries are now looking at extending the operating life of existing nuclear power plants or building new ones for the first time, largely due to worries over carbon emissions, energy security and high prices of fossil fuels.