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On nuclear power, the warnings are clear

by NCR Editorial Staff



(Paul Lachine)

Like Three Mile Island in the 1970s and Chernobyl in the 1980s, we will be studying the lessons of Fukushima for decades to come. But at least one thing is clear today: The benefits of nuclear power are too few, and the consequences of serious mishap too great, to make it a reliable component of the energy supply the world needs in the decades to come.

Nuclear power is simply too risky. It is a temptation world governments must resist.

As we write, the worst may be yet to come in Japan. This wretched story will take weeks, months perhaps, to unfold. But the prospect of a radiological cloud generated by failed containment forcing the evacuation of towns and cities is real, as is the poisoning of Japan's food supply, or the onslaught of childhood leukemia similar to that which occurred at Chernobyl in Ukraine. (Those who argue, as pro-nuclear pundits did on television talk shows last week, that the vast majority of leukemia sufferers at Chernobyl ultimately survived need a reminder of the pain and suffering those victims endured -- through years of side-effects-inducing chemotherapy and, ironically, cell-killing radiation.)

These scenarios serve as a warning to an energy-hungry warming planet tempted by the prospect of a non-carbon alternative to today's energy sources: Don't go there.

Prior to Fukushima, nuclear power was undergoing a widely hailed "renaissance." In light of global warming, even longtime opponents were beginning to rethink their opposition to the controversial power source. Among nuclear supporters is the Obama administration, which has pledged \$50 billion-plus in loan subsidies to an industry unable to attract enough private investment to make its product viable.

These newfound friends were a godsend to the nuclear power industry, which had been stifled in putting a plant online in the United States in the 30 years since the accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. The Obama administration's enthusiasm for the nuclear option promised a new day. Internationally, the growing economies of China and India brought with them an insatiable need for power. In the developed world, nearly 90 percent of France's power is provided by nuclear plants.

Fukushima has not changed all that, but it has raised enough questions to slow the "renaissance." In the United States, President Obama ordered the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to conduct a "safety review" of the nation's nuclear power plants. (Even as he issued the order, Obama declared nuclear energy "an important part of our energy future, along with renewable sources like wind, solar, natural gas and clean coal.")

More significantly, in Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel ordered the closure of the nation's seven oldest nuclear reactors, pending a three-month review of their safety.

A handful of U.S. plants have extremely high population densities within 50 miles. Energy Secretary Steven Chu, appearing on morning news shows recently, said the evacuation plans for the Indian Point nuclear power plants in New York state should be "looked at and studied in greater detail." Some 21 million people live within a 50-mile radius of Indian Point, 24 miles north of New York City. Fifty miles is the radius ordered evacuated around the tsunami-damaged nuclear plants in Japan.

The secondary reasons for opposing nuclear power are compelling:

- Though hardly a fledgling industry, nuclear power costs too much. It is not financially viable without the type of capital subsidies that Obama is promising. In the wake of Fukushima, don't look for private investors to be more enthusiastic about nuclear power that does not come with the promise of greater government subsidies.
- Safe disposal of the waste generated by nuclear plants is simply impossible. Each of the disposal plans envisioned -- including in the U.S. placement of waste in Nevada's Yucca Mountains -- brings with it a host of risks neighbors of the disposal sites reject. Who can blame them?
- In this age of terrorism, the threat posed by nuclear plants -- either directly, through attacks on the plants themselves, or through the hijacking of the byproducts necessary to produce a nuclear weapon -- is a real and present danger.
- Nuclear power is not at all emissions free, if emissions in relation to uranium mining, transportation, plant construction and decommissioning, and waste storage are included in the calculation. Globally, tripling nuclear capacity by 2050 might contribute 12.5 to 20 percent to the necessary emission reductions to reduce climate change. But such scenarios -- one plant every two weeks -- have no link to political reality, and the costs would be astronomical.

What are the lessons of Fukushima? We have been warned. Whether we are wise enough to act on that warning is up to us.

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