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The nuclear power debate.

Switzerland could start having problems meeting its energy needs by about 2020. The Federal Council's solution is a combination of power-saving and new nuclear power stations. But the country is as split over atomic energy as it has ever been. By René Lenzin

Two of Switzerland's five nuclear power stations will be ready for decommissioning in 10 to 15 years. At about the same time, long-term energy supply agreements with France will run out. That's why the term "shortfalls" is on everyone's lips in Switzerland at present. What does it mean? That Switzerland won't be able to secure its energy supplies from about 2020. The electricity industry was the first to warn about the looming threat, and it promptly suggested a remedy: Switzerland needed new nuclear power plants, while gas-fired power stations could fill the gap in the short-term.

Even the Federal Council recently considered different energy-related scenarios. It is betting on a four-pronged approach based on energy efficiency, renewable energy, large-scale power stations and foreign energy policy. Energy Minister Moritz Leuenberger thinks the first point is particularly important. However, the Government has yet to spell out how it plans to save energy. Existing energy-reduction programmes have so far failed to have a decisive effect on con-

sumption (see box). The Federal Council has decided in principle that Switzerland needs new nuclear power plants to secure its energy supplies.

This decision drew a storm of protest from Social Democrats, the Greens and environmental groups, who pledged to oppose the construction of more nuclear power stations with all their might. They are convinced that future needs can be secured through a mixture of energy-saving measures and renewable energy sources. They want an emphasis on wind energy in particular in the short term, and on geothermal energy, biomass and solar power in the long term. Centre-right politicians applauded the Federal Council's decision. The Liberals and the Swiss People's Party want a new nuclear power station built as soon as possible. The Christian Democrats are more reticent, but they too want to keep the nuclear option open.

And the Swiss themselves? They have been anything but consistent. In 2003, they rejected moves both to scrap nuclear power and to declare a moratorium. However, opinion polls regularly find that a majority of the Swiss have reservations about new nuclear power plants. There probably won't be any clarity on the issue until a specific construction project is on the table. If the politicians approve the plans, the decision will be put to the electorate because co-determination is firmly anchored in the Nuclear Power Act.

The energy debate overlaps with that over global warming to some extent, especially with regard to gas-fired power stations, which could be built quickly and would therefore be practical to plug short-term shortfalls, whatever the situation. However, they are hazardous to the environment because of the large volumes of CO₂ they release. That's why most politicians rule them out unless the emission of similar amounts of CO₂ can be prevented.

Focus: Atomic energy

Nuclear power has become a core issue in this general election year. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, the Federal Council raised the importance of expanding the country's nuclear output from "an option" to "a necessity" in March. Five nuclear power stations at four locations currently generate 42 percent of our domestic electricity.

Following the row in 1988 over the planned Kaiseraugst nuclear power plant and the approval of a ten-year construction moratorium in a 1990 referendum, the issue calmed down somewhat. In 2003, voters clearly rejected the "Electricity without Atoms" initiative (calling for an end to nuclear power) and the "Moratorium Plus" initiative aimed at extending the temporary halt on construction.

Major power plants are an important pillar of the Federal Council's new energy plans. Gas-fired plants have no chance of being accepted in the current political climate. By contrast, the environmental aspects of atomic energy are being stressed. But this form of energy also has serious disadvantages: a new nuclear power station costs CHF 5 billion to CHF 6 billion to build. Finding the necessary funding for such projects is the sector's biggest problem, not to mention the fact that it can take 16-18 years from planning to operation. Added to this, Switzerland's system of democracy gives the Swiss people the final say on new nuclear power plants.

Although Switzerland's nuclear power plants have a good safety record, the incident at Sweden's most modern nuclear power station in Forsmark last summer once again highlighted the dangers of atomic energy. A former director of Forsmark described it as the most serious nuclear incident since Chernobyl.

The question of what to do with highly radioactive waste is and remains nuclear power's Achilles heel. The Federal Council may not approve any new nuclear power stations without proof that the associated waste can be disposed of securely. And here too the people have the final say. Perhaps it is technically feasible to dump highly radioactive nuclear waste in Switzerland, as the Federal Council claims, but one fundamental ethical question remains: who will accept responsibility for ensuring that it is stored safely for the next 10,000 or even 100,000 years?

ROLF RIBI

SWITZERLAND'S GROWING ENERGY NEEDS

■ Between 2000 and 2006, domestic energy consumption rose by more than 10 percent, despite the Government's energy-saving programme.

Consumption even increased in years in which the Swiss economy shrank (2003) or mild winters reduced the amount of heating required (2006). RL

Year	Power consumption	Increase
2000	52.3 bn kWh	2.3%
2001	53.7 bn kWh	2.6%
2002	54.0 bn kWh	0.5%
2003	55.1 bn kWh	2.0%
2004	56.2 bn kWh	1.9%
2005	57.3 bn kWh	2.1%
2006	57.8 bn kWh	0.8%

SOURCE: FEDERAL OFFICE OF ENERGY