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High hurdles for extending the life of Germany's nuclear power plants



Germany's new government is considering extending the lives of some of the country's nuclear plants - under strict conditions. The deliberations come as a ceiling at a nuclear waste storage site caved in.

Nuclear energy remains highly controversial in Germany

Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU) and her new liberal Free Democrat (FDP) coalition partner are embroiled in coalition talks this week, where both parties have indicated their willingness to nix current nuclear phase-out plans in favor of extending the operational life span of nuclear plants in connection with strict security standards.

These would include dealing with some of the older plants' susceptibility to breakdowns; heightened security would call for fortifying walls and guaranteeing better protection from terrorist attacks and plane crashes.

The conservatives and the FDP have repeatedly argued that it would be irresponsible to rush a phase-out of nuclear energy before it is clear that other sources can make up the deficit. It would be impossible to replace nuclear with low-cost renewables in such a short time.

Nuclear energy as a 'bridge' technology

Germany has pledged to reduce its carbon dioxide (CO₂) output by nearly 40 percent over 1990 levels by 2020, but a nuclear shutdown would make this goal much harder to reach. Shutting off nuclear plants, which produce practically no carbon dioxide, would mean using more fossil fuels.

Germany covers about a quarter of its energy consumption with nuclear power. Under current legislation, a complete phase-out is planned for 2021; eight of the country's 17 reactors are currently due to cease output in 2018.

Any notion that the nuclear industry could run itself safely and transparently received a harsh blow this year. In July, a nuclear plant at Krümmel in northern Germany broke down just days after a two-year shutdown prompted by an earlier accident.

A month later, news broke that the German government under former Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the 1980s had suppressed scientific evidence against using the Gorleben underground salt cavern as a permanent nuclear waste storage site.



The future of the dilapidated Asse site is up in the air

Mismanagement of nuclear waste dumps in old salt mines

At the Asse temporary storage site in northern Germany, levels of plutonium were revealed as three times higher than had been previously admitted. Experts warned that the mine should never have been used to store 126,000 barrels of low and medium-level contaminated materials because daily, thousands of liters of groundwater seeped into the tunnels.

The problems at that instable site have not ceased: on Thursday, a ceiling caved in about 500 meters below the surface. The Federal Office for Radiation Protection (BfS) in Salzgitter said the two tunnels affected did not contain radioactive nuclear waste: "There is no immediate danger." The BfS is currently checking whether to permanently close the Asse site.

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