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European power firms call for clear rules on new nuclear plants



Cattenom nuclear plant, France

(PRAGUE) - European power companies called Friday for urgent EU-wide moves to clear the way for new nuclear plants, stressing the security and climate change dangers of a failure to act.

"We have a barrel of oil costing 135 dollars a barrel, it is urgent to act. Industry cannot wait for a gradual approach to lead to convergence (in harmonised safety rules)," Electricite de France board member Bruno Lescoeur warned on the second, final day of the European Nuclear Energy Forum.

Companies want standard certification procedures for new nuclear plants as Europe faces the challenge of replacing many ageing reactors and the forum called for the European Commission to come up with a clear directive.

"We have to renew 50 percent of electricity production in the EU between now and 2030. This is one of the major problems we face," European Parliament member Nicole Fontaine told the gathering, which brought together industry regulators, politicians and power companies.

A patchwork of technical rules for plants and their construction exist across the European Union currently, obstructing new reactors.

"At the moment you can count on five years to get permission to build a plant and another five to build it," Dr. Werner Zaiss, of the pro-nuclear atomic group, Foratom, told AFP.

Common rules would also cut costs, he added.

Board member of German power company, RWE, Gerd Jager said the challenge of getting European harmonisation must be faced.

"We must go there. It brings the possibility of increasing public acceptance (of nuclear power) and stability, and strengthens Europe's role in nuclear power," Jager said.

"There is the risk that we are losing time. In 2020, we have very ambitious carbon (reduction) targets. We have to have successful nuclear projects at least to replace decommissioned units if (we are) to meet carbon targets at the EU level," he said.

Nuclear energy seemed assured of a strong future in the 1960s but serious accidents -- at Three Mile Island in the United States in 1979 and then Chernobyl, Ukraine in 1986 -- sparked public unease and led to a scaling back of the industry.

However, as fuel costs have soared in the past few years, nuclear energy has come back into favour, with proponents saying it would be cheaper in the long run and end Western dependence on oil and gas supplies from volatile parts of the world.

At the same time, they say, nuclear power would reduce carbon dioxide emissions and so help curb global warming.

"We are more and more dependent on oil and gas imported from unstable parts of the world at high price," Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek warned the forum on Thursday.

"We have come to a time today where we must do more than talk about nuclear energy," he said, warning: "It is really five minutes to midnight."

Patricia Lorenz of Friends of the Earth Europe meanwhile challenged the industry to reveal its true costs and say how it would deal with nuclear waste and other environmental problems.

"We want a real liability regime where the industry pays for what happens (in the case of accidents)," Lorenz said Friday, criticising state help.

Lorenz said countries were also trying to get around the nuclear waste issue by sending it, to Russia for example, for re-processing.

"There is no solution for waste ... The de facto solution is sending (it) to Russia. This only shows that the industry cannot deal with this problem and it is not trying properly," she claimed.

The Czech government pledged Friday that it would bring together energy suppliers and consumers during its EU presidency in the first half of next year.

"The Czech Republic plans to arrange a European, high-level conference or possibly a summit addressing those challenges for energy security," Czech Deputy Premier Alexandr Vondra said.

The Czech Republic takes the helm of EU affairs at the start of 2009 and could face the task of wrapping up ambitious targets to cut EU carbon emissions by 2020 as part of an overall climate and energy package.

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[European Nuclear Energy Forum](#)

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