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Nuclear power is back on the agenda, boosted by concerns over energy security and carbon emissions, says Mike Scott

In 2006, the International Energy Agency came out in support of nuclear power as one of the ways to meet emissions targets and ensure energy security, something it had not done before.

And the IEA has strong support from a host of prominent figures in the environmental community, including James Lovelock, inventor of the Gaia theory (where the entire planet's environment is considered as a single organism), Sir David King, the UK government's chief scientist, and Patrick Moore, one of the founders of Greenpeace.

So, with energy suppliers struggling to expand their renewable energy capacity, can nuclear's low-carbon qualities help it to become more acceptable in future?

Emissions, emissions

A British Energy life cycle analysis estimates that its Torness nuclear power station emits just over five g/kWh of carbon dioxide, compared to around 900 g/kWh from a typical UK coal plant, based upon the operational stage alone. Typical emissions from a combined-cycle gas turbine are around 400 g/kWh.

According to EDF, the French power company, replacing the UK's existing nuclear power stations with gas-fired power stations would cause emissions to rise by 7.95 million tonnes of carbon per year – the equivalent of increasing the number of cars on Britain's roads by 40%.

"Uranium is a non-renewable resource and nuclear fission creates long-lasting radioactive waste"

This is a urgent issue as all but one of the UK's ten nuclear power stations are due to be closed by 2023. "People are reappraising nuclear – it is a low-carbon source of electricity and it is being recognised as such," says Chris Anastasi, head of environmental affairs at British Energy.

The company, which generates 86.8% of its power from nuclear, supplies the electricity that runs the UK rail network. Keith Parker, chief executive of the Nuclear Industry Association said in a letter to the Independent newspaper in July 2007: "Nuclear energy provides a genuinely low-carbon source of transport across the UK, ensuring that the carbon footprint of rail travellers in Britain is minimal."

Nuclear subsidies

But not everyone is convinced. Stephen Hine of Eiris, the Ethical Investment Research Service, says there are still a number of issues around nuclear. "It could be argued that there is a subsidy for nuclear power, with the government taking on the costs of decommissioning and dealing with nuclear waste," he says.

Nor has the waste disposal issue been properly dealt with, Hine believes. "New nuclear power stations may produce less waste, but it still has to go somewhere. I think it will be a challenge to persuade people that nuclear power is green power."

Businesses are cautious about relying on nuclear, too.

Belinda Howell, chief executive of Greenstone Carbon Management, says there are several reasons nuclear cannot be marketed as environmentally friendly. "Uranium is a non-renewable resource and nuclear fission creates long-lasting radioactive waste. Also, scientists have shown that climate change appears to be moving faster than previously predicted. We need to cut energy demand and emissions within ten years, while nuclear power will only start to come on stream a decade from now."

Big doubts

J Sainsbury, owner of UK supermarket chain Sainsbury's, says questions about whether it would seek out nuclear power as a low-carbon source of energy were too hypothetical to give a definitive answer.

Retailer Marks & Spencer says nuclear is not on its agenda. Instead, the company is focusing on generation on-site using anaerobic digestion or encouraging its food suppliers to erect wind turbines with M&S then committing to buying the power generated.

And investors have their doubts as well. Emma Howard-Boyd, head of socially responsible investment at Jupiter Asset Management, says: "I don't think there is a clear public consensus on nuclear power. I would caution any company against using it as a low-carbon strategy."

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