Debating the Merits of Nuclear Power

MAY 8, 2014

To the Editor:

Re “The Right Lessons From Chernobyl” (editorial, May 2):

The danger posed by nuclear power goes far beyond the catastrophic accidents that have occurred at Chernobyl and Fukushima. As the nuclear weapon programs of North Korea, Pakistan, Israel, India and perhaps Iran have shown, civilian nuclear power programs are inextricably linked with the technology needed to develop nuclear weapons.

We cannot promote nuclear power as a source of electricity and also expect to prevent nuclear weapon proliferation, a development that poses as great a threat to humanity as global warming.

Furthermore, nuclear power is not an inexpensive bridge to an energy system based on renewable sources. It competes for resources with renewables, diverting money from the very technologies we need to promote. Numerous studies provide blueprints for replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources more cheaply and quickly than nuclear power can.

It is time to abandon the myth of the peaceful atom and focus on building a renewable energy system that meets the needs of all people.

CATHERINE THOMASSON
IRA HELFAND

The writers are, respectively, executive director of Physicians for Social Responsibility and co-president of International Physicians for the
To the Editor:

You are correct that there needs to be a rational balance between the risks of technology and the ultimate benefit, which in the case of nuclear power is supplying electricity while reducing the effect of climate change. The case for nuclear, as you say, lies in the drawbacks of the competition.

There is no magic energy source despite how green the alternatives are. Where power is needed, there is only insufficient and intermittent wind and sun, and a real challenge to compete economically.

Nuclear does need prudence, which has been well demonstrated in the United States, with reactors meeting exceptional safety standards. Independent, strict regulation works to make nuclear safe. It will allow nuclear power to make its contribution to controlling both polluting emissions and climate change.

MICHAEL CORRADINI
Madison, Wis., May 3, 2014

The writer is a professor of nuclear engineering and engineering physics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

To the Editor:

You do an excellent job of summing up the case for nuclear power. One critical point, however, is missing.

The main reason that “competition from cheap natural gas” is a factor in the shutdown of nuclear plants is that the price of natural gas does not include externalities: the costs of the damage it causes to the environment by contributing to climate change. These are costs that society will have to bear in the future and that will only grow with time.

And while natural gas causes less climate damage than coal, it is nevertheless unacceptable.

Unless we tax carbon emissions, either directly or through a cap-and-trade system, the economic incentives for making the right choices will remain distorted. That is something we cannot afford.

ZVI J. DORON
Pittsburgh, May 2, 2014

The writer is a retired nuclear engineer and co-author of a book (in German) about energy and climate policies.

To the Editor:

You belittle “unfounded fears of using nuclear power.”

To avoid nuclear power in the future is not an “unfounded fear” but a considered judgment based on nuclear disasters in three countries. Those demonstrate that we cannot trust the engineers and managers with the responsibility required.

The only sensible way forward is to adhere to greater prudence than you advocate: Require that all new and replacement energy come solely from renewable sources.

PAUL CAMPBELL

Beloit, Wis., May 2, 2014

The writer is a professor of mathematics and computer science at Beloit College.

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