

Fukushima and Energy Politics

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The Fukushima disaster was a classic focusing event, leading policymakers and wider publics to rethink the risk of nuclear accidents and the future of nuclear energy. Post-Fukushima opinion polls in 24 countries found 62% of respondents opposed nuclear power, making it even less popular than burning coal. (Solar, wind, and hydroelectric power were the most popular methods of producing electricity.)

The German government's decision to close the country's remaining nuclear plants means energy may need to be imported, including from nuclear plants in neighbouring countries. At the time of the decision, roughly a quarter of German electricity production was nuclear, in line with the EU and US averages and higher than the 15% in Canada. According to Eurostat, Germany was the EU's second-largest producer of nuclear energy (at around 15% of the EU total), trailing France, which accounted for almost half of all nuclear energy produced in the Union. Over half of Europe's (and over 80% of the world's) electricity production comes from burning oil, coal, and gas. These are nonrenewable, produce greenhouse gases, and their prices have increased sharply. The two main alternative energy sources are hydroelectricity and wind. About 12% of EU energy production is hydro; important in Norway, Latvia, Austria, Croatia, and Sweden. Only about 4% of EU energy production comes from wind, with Denmark, Portugal, Spain, and Ireland important producers. If policymakers and publics want to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, nuclear power remains one way to meet the ever-increasing demand for energy.

One post-Fukushima forecast for uranium prices noted that China, India, Russia, South Korea, the UK, the US and other countries plan to build new nuclear plants, even as countries like Japan (which before the tsunami relied upon nuclear power for 30% of its energy needs) and Germany plan to shut theirs. Besides hydro, wind, and solar power, alternatives such as biomass, geothermal and other renewable energy sources should also grow.