

Nuclear power across the border: Switzerland also having doubts

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In Germany, and now, also in nearby Switzerland, the nuclear emergency has restarted the debate **on the safety of the plants operating in the country**. The Swiss and foreign media are demanding more transparency on the themes linked to nuclear energy, in general, and on the information about the dangers, in particular. On Monday morning, during a meeting with the representatives of the Federal Energy Office and the Federal Nuclear Safety Inspectorate (IFSN), the federal councillor **Doris Leuthard** decided to interrupt the application procedures for preliminary authorisation for new nuclear power plants. The IFSN had been given the task of verifying the safety of the existing plants in Switzerland. Verification has already begun at the plant in Mühleberg. According to Doris Leuthard, “Safety is a top priority.”

What are the dangers for the Swiss power plants?

The information website Swissinfo provides a summary of the various positions on the topic. “Apart from the accusations of exploitation, there are a lot of questions that have been raised by the tragedy in Japan. ‘Will the old reactors of Beznau and Mühleberg remain?’ the newspaper **Le Temps** wonders. ‘Can we still imagine a future without nuclear power?’ **Le Matin** echoes. ‘Obviously, supporters of the nuclear option pretend that it’s all safe and that they have full control over the technology,’ **La Regione Ticino** comments. ‘In fact, the question that everyone is asking is, “Would our power stations really be able to withstand a similar earthquake?”’ According to **Blick**, the Swiss plants ‘are not shacks, but were built in accordance with the rules.’ But so were the Japanese plants. ‘For decades, the nuclear plants have provided energy without any problems, and we have become used to the idea that they’re safe. The Japanese people also thought they were safe. Until three days ago.’ The fear has now returned, writes **Blick**, so what should we do? The Swiss newspapers all appear to agree on the need for a ‘transparent’ and ‘honest’ debate before **the federal vote on the construction of one or two nuclear power plants, planned for 2013**. ‘The heads of the power plants have to lead the debate in a credible way, without trying to play down or hide the facts,’ **Tages Anzeiger** and **Bund** comment. ‘It is only with a transparent discussion that the people can express their opinions,’ adds **Le Matin**. ‘The promoters of nuclear power must inform the people of the true dangers, stop talking about shortages, and stop using angelic phrases.’ However, it will not be easy for the supporters of nuclear power to convince the most sceptical of the advantages of this technology, **Aargauer Zeitung** writes. This opinion is shared also by **NZZ**, according to which ‘it is important to tackle the core of the problem, once and for all, namely the human and technical ability to control this energy source, also in the event of a serious accident.’”

The power stations in Switzerland

The legal foundation of the Swiss policy on nuclear energy dates back to 1946, when Parliament approved the first decree of the federal council, promoting nuclear energy. In 1957, the legislation concerning the nuclear energy sector was linked to the Constitution. Two years later, on 23 December 1959, Parliament approved the law on nuclear energy. With the federal decree concerning the law on nuclear energy in 1978, the law was completed with the introduction of preliminary authorisation, with the demonstration of the need to build nuclear power plants and the transferral, to the producers, of the

responsibility for the safe disposal of the radioactive waste. On 1 February 2005, the law on nuclear energy and the federal council's decree were replaced by a new law and decree on nuclear energy. According to the new law, the issuing of preliminary authorisation, by the federal council and by the federal assembly, for new nuclear power plants may be subject to a referendum. In Switzerland, nuclear energy **is used exclusively for peaceful purposes**: for the production of electricity, and for applications in the medical, industrial and research sectors. Throughout the year, calculated over a ten year period, 39% of the country's electricity comes from nuclear power, with peaks of 45% in winter. Consequently, Switzerland is above the European average of 33%. **Switzerland's five nuclear power plants** have an overall power output of 3.2 GW, and an annual availability of over 90%.

The operating plants (from the website of the Federal Energy Office)

	Start of operation	Characteristics
Beznau I	1969	Power: 365 MWe Type of reactor: pressurised water Cooling: direct, with river water
Beznau II	1972	Power: 365 MWe Type of reactor: pressurised water Cooling: direct, with river water
Mühleberg	1972	Power: 355 MWe Type of reactor: boiling water Cooling: direct, with river water
Gösgen	1978	Power: 970 MWe Type of reactor: pressurised water Cooling: cooling tower
Leibstadt	1984	Power: 1165 MWe (since 26/8/02) Type of reactor: boiling water Cooling: cooling tower

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