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Does Switzerland need nuclear power stations and, if so, how many?

THERE ARE CURRENTLY FIVE NUCLEAR POWER STATIONS in operation in Switzerland: Beznau I and Beznau II in the Canton of Aargau, Mühlberg in the Canton of Berne and two larger plants at Gösgen in the Canton of Solothurn and Leibstadt in the Canton of Aargau. These nuclear power stations will have to be decommissioned between 2020 and 2045 in line with legislation. Plans for new nuclear power stations are therefore in full swing. Three planning applications have been submitted, and the heated debate between the advocates and opponents of nuclear power has begun in earnest.

Let us not forget the Swiss people set the course for energy policy years ago in two highly controversial referenda. On 23 September 1990, the people and the cantons rejected the popular initiative "for the withdrawal from nuclear power" by a narrow margin with a No vote of 52.9%. At the same time, the referendum on the moratorium "stop the construction of nuclear power stations" was approved with 54.4% of the people and cantons voting in favour. On the same day, 71.1% of the people and cantons endorsed the incorporation of the new energy article into the Federal Constitution.

On 18 May 2003, two energy policy proposals were soundly rejected by the people and the cantons: 58.4% voted against the popular initiative "Moratorium Plus – for an extension to the halt on construction of nuclear power stations and the limitation of nuclear risk", and 66.3% said No to the popular initiative "electricity without nuclear energy – for a change in energy policy and gradual decommissioning of nuclear power stations". The Swiss people kept open the option of nuclear power through these decisions.

For the Federal Council and the energy industry the case is clear: they consider the construction of new nuclear power stations absolutely necessary. However, environmental politicians are of the opposite opinion and have branded the Federal Council's proposals for energy efficiency and renewable sources as "feeble". They are pinning all their hopes of a green future on state-subsidised renewable sources and the carbon dioxide tax on fossil fuels.

The potential of alternative energy is clearly far from being exhausted and there is still plenty of scope for saving electricity. Whether future electricity requirements can and should be met without nuclear power stations is a subjective issue. While the supporters of nuclear power champion the "cleanest energy" and regard the issue of permanent storage for nuclear waste as resolved, opponents quite simply see highly radioactive waste as a huge problem for mankind.

The question of whether Switzerland needs nuclear power stations and how many will emotionally preoccupy and divide the people as long as it remains relevant to energy supply. It is clear that electricity must be saved and alternative energy promoted intensively in all areas. If energy consumption is excessive, politicians will have little choice but to approve new nuclear power stations. Unfortunately, in the time since the moratorium too little has been done in Switzerland to promote alternatives to nuclear energy on a wide scale.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Heinz Eckert



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Cover photo: The Cavagnoli dam holds back Lago dei Cavagnöö near Fusio in the Canton of Ticino. Behind is the Lago di Robie dam (photo: Keystone)

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