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Mild winter eases energy fears

Europe's energy crisis also has implications for Switzerland. Thanks to mild temperatures and replenished reservoirs, the country was able to avert an emergency this winter. But the threat of power shortages remains.

THEODORA PETER

Last autumn, Switzerland was bracing itself for an uncomfortable winter of sparsely heated homes and dimly lit streets. The Federal Council was drawing up a contingency plan and urging the nation to save energy. In a worst case scenario, households would have to ration their consumption and companies shut down their operations.

This scenario was already looking unlikely by January – and had failed to materialise by the editorial deadline for this issue of “Swiss Review”. That was partly due to the weather. The first half of the winter was relatively mild throughout Europe. Switzerland basked in spring-like temper-

atures of up to 15°C over the festive period. Hazel bushes were already beginning to blossom by mid-January in lower-lying areas. People were heating their homes less, while European gas storage levels were higher than expected.

Furthermore, Swiss reservoirs were at higher-than-average levels following extensive autumn rainfall. Domestic hydropower is one of the keys to Swiss energy security. Power plant operators therefore set up a strategic hydropower reserve in their reservoirs to ensure they would still be in a position to generate at least 24 days of power by the beginning of spring.

Despite hydropower, Switzerland relies on imported electricity in the

The emergency power plant in Birr – hurriedly approved and rapidly built, it can supply 400,000 households with electricity if need be.

Photo: Keystone

winter months – including French nuclear power. The feared supply bottlenecks due to half of France's nuclear power stations being shut for maintenance in autumn never materialised, because most of these plants managed to get back online in time.

Reserve power plants in case of an emergency

Back in summer 2022, the Federal Council approved the rapid construction of a reserve power plant in Birr (canton of Aargau) as a back-up in case of a power crunch. This facility is fitted out to operate with gas, oil or hydrogen. Its eight mobile turbines have a total output of 250 megawatts, which is enough to power around 400,000 households. The plant has been operational since the end of February and will remain in place until 2026, if necessary. The existing thermal power plant in Cornaux (canton of Neuchâtel) can produce an additional 36 megawatts, if need be.

There are no power shortages yet, but neither has the government given the all-clear. The situation is likely to be more challenging next winter, say experts. Gas storage facilities were still being replenished with Russian supplies last year, but sanctions in connection with the war in Ukraine mean that Europe can no longer rely on Russian gas. The search for alternative energy sources is ultimately a race against time.



Current energy consumption in Switzerland:
revue.link/dashboard