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Do Not Follow Germany Down Phaseout Path, Warns Forum President

Comment & People

27 Jun (NucNet): If combatting climate change is to be a priority the world will need nuclear as part of its energy mix and must not follow Germany down a phase-out path that is “irrational” and did not take account of the evidence that showed the country’s nuclear stations were safe, the president of the German Atomic Forum (DAF) told NucNet.

Ralf Güldner said if the world’s highest political priority is climate protection and climate change mitigation, then “we have to use all sources of carbon-free energy production and nuclear is part of the solution”.

He said this is something he has been saying for 20 years – that nuclear is not the solution, but is part of the solution. He said the question is if there really is a solution to climate change without nuclear. “What can different countries use for energy generation? Wind, solar, fossil, nuclear? The demand for energy of a growing global population is increasing and the issue is what society chooses to be of the highest priority.”

Mr Güldner disagreed with claims made in a speech by Jochen Flasbarth, state secretary at the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB), who said Germany’s nuclear phaseout decision was “rational” and not a matter of emotion after the Fukushima-Daiichi accident.

Mr Güldner said: “Do you believe that if it were a rational decision then no other country would follow us? It was clear that in Germany there was a large anti-nuclear pressure. In the end, it was a political and emotional decision. It was not a rational decision.”

Mr Güldner said the argument that nuclear in Germany was not safe did not stand up to examination. He said stress tests carried out on nuclear plants in Europe following Fukushima-Daiichi showed that German reactor units were among the safest. German utilities have continuously invested in refurbishment and safety. Lessons were learned from every relevant accident or serious malfunction anywhere in the world. Altogether, the investment in refurbishment ended up being higher than the initial investments for most plants, Mr Güldner said.

If the German government had taken a rational decision, then it would have waited for the results of the stress tests, then started discussions with neighbouring states and European institutions, he said.

“What happened was very irrational. We do not have any tsunamis in Germany and our plants did not become less safe because of a tsunami in Japan.”

Mr Güldner noted that six months before Fukushima-Daiichi, Ms Merkel and her government gave the green light for lifetime extensions of nuclear plants.

He said Germany cannot always rely on imports from its neighbours because if Germany’s demand is high then a neighbour’s demand is high too. He said when Ms Merkel originally announced that nuclear energy would be phased out she proposed building gas-fired power stations, but gas is not economical at current prices and it is hard to see who might invest in it.

“I am wondering how all this can happen in the long run. Which energy sources can replace all the missing capacity from renewables in the event of high demand or lower supply? What happens when the wind is not blowing or the sun not shining?”

Mr Güldner said the UK example is interesting because by creating a contract for difference with a strike price of about £91 per MWh [for the proposed Hinkley Point C nuclear station] the UK created a level playing field for all carbon-free energy sources. By contrast, the offshore wind price is roughly £110 per MWh at capacity auctions.

“But if you look at the situation in Germany and the market structure we have, nuclear gets some €20 per MWh in the forward contracts for 2018 and 2019, while my colleagues responsible for offshore wind power get close to 10 times as much. This is not a level playing field,” he said.

Mr Güldner said Germany needs to look at the whole picture. But he said he is sure Germany will not reverse the nuclear phaseout. “We will shut down our power plants one after the other until 2022 and then we will see where the energy is going to come from.”

Germany's problem in the absence of baseload nuclear is that it fluctuates between "excessive power production" and periods when renewables produce almost nothing. "My guess is that we are going to build gas-fired power stations and connect them to the grid in order to ensure the grid's stability," Mr Güldner said.

But he warned there would be costs. In 2012, the winter in Europe was cold and there was not enough wind to power Germany's windmills. Germany tried to start all its fossil-powered capacity, including its most modern gas-fired power plant in Irsching, southern Germany. However, there was no gas in the system; there was not enough pressure in the pipes. "We could not start Irsching so we started other smaller oil-fired power plants in the area instead," Mr Güldner said.

He said: "To feed gas-powered stations it is not enough to just connect them to the existing grid. You also need to improve the gas pipeline infrastructure, which has its costs."

Mr Güldner said the 2022 phaseout deadline is close and infrastructure projects in Germany take some time. "I think we really have to hurry. We really need to have a plan. If it will be gas, then the government needs to make its commitments clearer."

Mr Güldner called on governments globally to support nuclear by standardising licensing processes, so plants can be built within reliable timeframes and at affordable cost. Delays at Olkiluoto-3 in Finland and Flamanville-3 in France have been "very detrimental" to the assessment of the viability of nuclear because private investors will have doubts about investing billions in nuclear projects without having any political certainty, he said. "The decisions and priorities need to come clear from the very top – what are our targets and priorities in the long term."

The European Commission's nuclear illustrative programme, or Pinc, published in April, was an example of this lack of direction, Mr Güldner said, calling the report "rather vague". He said the Pinc showed that nuclear should be still part of the future energy supply system in Europe, but what the German nuclear industry expected from the Pinc was "a clearer commitment" on behalf of the EC – a clearer outlook of what it expects the EU's energy mix to look like by 2050 and the place nuclear has in it.

"They mention that nuclear's share in the mix by 2050 will be around 20 percent, but I am not sure if this will be sufficient if we want to meet our climate targets. Twenty percent could be enough, but only if we can increase energy efficiency in other areas."

According to the EC, the nuclear share of electricity generation in Europe in 2013 was 26.8 percent.

As the German nuclear energy industry moves towards decommissioning, Mr Güldner says "we know rather well how to do it and what it will cost". He said Germany already has experience decommissioning older reactors and there are companies with enough expertise. "If the authorities are willing to support us, we should be able to make it within the cost and time frame set. I do not expect many surprises."

The bigger problem is the drawn-out process of finding a site for a deep geologic repository, which will store spent fuel from decommissioned nuclear plants.

The Gorleben salt dome, in Lower Saxony, has been under investigation as a potential repository site. A moratorium on the evaluation of Gorleben was introduced in 2000 by the former Social Democrat and Green Party administration, but ended in 2010 and exploration was restarted.

Work at the site was discontinued again at the end of 2012 to allow for a political compromise on site selection and then ended when the Site Selection Act came into force in July 2013. The law says the site has to be kept open, but secured, and that Gorleben will not be excluded from any new site selection process.

Mr Güldner said the selection process the Commission Storage of High-Level Radioactive Waste Materials is now designing is "very complicated". It creates additional delays and could be easier. "It is always difficult to progress when one has a committee with 16 members with voting power (34 in total) from various stakeholder groups and has to find a compromise."

He said "We are not satisfied with everything, but we can make our arguments and it is politics which takes the decision in the end."

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