

Learning to love (or even tolerate) nuclear power

Environmentalists must now embrace it

BY DAVID K. HECHT
THE CONVERSATION

In June, California utility Pacific Gas and Electric announced plans for phasing out its Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, located on the central California coast. If the current timetable holds, late summer 2025 will see the first time in over six decades that the nation’s most populous state will have no licensed nuclear power providers.

This is big news. Forty years ago, Diablo Canyon stood at the middle of an intense controversy over the safety and desirability of nuclear power. Those debates stand as part of the origin story of the anti-nuclear movement; failure to stop the plant from coming online educated and galvanized a generation of anti-nuclear activists. From this perspective, Pacific Gas and Electric’s decision to replace nuclear output with renewable energy seems to be an environmental victory, a belated vindication of the anti-nuclear efforts of the 1970s.

But in the era of climate change, no decision regarding energy production is simple. California’s move away from nuclear power comes alongside a modest reappraisal of a technology that was once vilified by the vast majority of environmentalists. James Hansen, the scientist whose 1988 testimony before Congress provided climate change with much-needed visibility and political salience, has become one of a number of prominent environmentalists to support nuclear power.

The problems of waste, security and ensuring accident-free operation are as vexing as ever. But context is key, and the real but remote dangers of nuclear power may prove more manageable than the more visible — and accelerating — consequences of a warming planet.

Diablo today might be sitting on a second juncture in nuclear history in the United States, one where environmentalists will have to embrace — or even just accept — the very technology that helped teach them to be suspicious of relying too much on technical solutions to the political and social challenge of powering our society.

Atom-powered dreams

For decades before it became an activist target, nuclear power was celebrated as revolutionary science. From the first decade of the 20th century, newspapers and magazines reported the discoveries of Ernest Rutherford, Marie Curie and other nuclear pioneers. The prospect of transmuting matter — of turning one element into another — had been a dream of medieval alchemists, and journalists and their readers alike were quick to thrill to the new science.

It was frequently heralded as something new in the universe, and a symbol of mankind’s burgeoning ability to control nature. Moreover, the mere potential of releasing the energy stored by splitting or fusing atoms quickly gave rise to fantasies of technological utopia, in which innovations such as radium-infused medical treatments and uranium-powered ships would transform the world.

A generation later, the success of the Manhattan Project made such speculation seem plausible. Postwar media reveled in the prospect of all sorts of atomic miracles: electric cars, cheap power, weather control and cancer cures. In 1953, President Eisenhower gave official sanction to at least some of these dreams with his “Atoms for Peace” initiative, and his second term had barely begun when a power plant in Shippingport, Pennsylvania began supplying nuclear-produced electricity.

Additional plants quickly came

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OP ART CREDIT

Waste doesn’t stop
How PERC plans to adapt after a trash war

BY CHRISTOPHER BURNS
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After months of debate about the future of trash disposal post-2018 across central and northern Maine, state environmental regulators and town officials in Hampden have cleared the way for construction of a trash-to-energy facility that could cost up to \$69 million.

The Municipal Review Committee and Maryland-based Fiberight LLC have secured commitments from towns across the region to send about 107,000 tons of trash annually to the facility, far short of their original 150,000-ton goal, according to a Bangor Daily News analysis. But they argue the plant still can be viable.

With the Fiberight plant moving ahead, the post-2018 solid waste landscape will look much different for the Penobscot Energy Recovery Co., currently the state’s largest waste-to-energy processor, which has accepted trash from the MRC’s 187 member towns for three decades. But only a handful of the MRC’s member towns opted to continue sending their trash to the facility in Orrington after their contracts expire in 2018.

Even with the substantial loss of tonnage, PERC officials maintain their facility can remain viable with a shift toward processing more commercial trash.

“We have absolutely every intention of keeping this running,” said Bob Knudsen, the vice president of USA Energy Group, the majority owner of PERC. “We’re not going to go away just because we don’t quite have enough tonnage.”

Attempts to stave off an exodus of tonnage during its months-long match against

MRC and Fiberight leaves PERC with the need to tap new waste sources.

In December 2015, PERC announced a partnership with WasteZero, Casella and Exeter Agri-Energy to offer towns that stuck with the facility options for waste-reduction programs such as pay-as-you-throw and organics diversion in order to help them reduce disposal costs, according to a memo sent to PERC’s municipal customers.

PERC championed this plan as a way to give towns more control over their trash in contrast to Fiberight, whose biogas production depends on organic material in trash. Organics account for almost 43 percent of what Mainers throw away. Towns that send waste to the trash-to-energy plant in Hampden would need Fiberight’s approval before implementing initiatives to divert organics from the waste stream.

But even offering flexibility with waste-reduction programs and eliminating its minimum tonnage requirements and associated penalties didn’t prove successful in helping PERC retain a critical mass of MRC member towns.

Only about 23,200 tons of trash from 23 towns and the Penobscot County Unorganized Territory had been committed to PERC as of Tuesday, according to a BDN analysis. Just 22 towns with about 15,400 tons have not yet committed to a trash processor for after 2018.

PERC had sought to retain 50,000 to 60,000 tons from the 180,000 tons the MRC towns sends annually to Orrington, Knudsen said.

Even with that tonnage, PERC still would fall short of the full amount it aimed to secure, meaning the facility will have to rely on tapping

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Time to denounce less, fix a lot more

Moderate Muslims must denounce terrorist attacks!” “Portland police must denounce police shootings!” As for me? I hereby denounce denouncing.

It is all getting a bit out of hand. If life imitates art, then these perpetual calls for denouncements seem an awful lot like 1984’s “two minutes hate.” This zeal to be continually outraged is, frankly, exhausting, and doesn’t provide any actual solutions. Further, in order to get news coverage, “shares,” “retweets,” — basically, attention — we ignore individuality in favor of sweeping, media-ready stereotypes that meet preconceived notions.

For example, take the civil disturbance of the Portland Racial Justice Congress a few weeks back. Part of its demands included Chief Michael Sauschuck effectively denouncing police shootings in other places, shootings to which he was only connected to by his choice of profession. This is the Portland Police Department, which had just worked cooperatively with another group to constructively make its voice heard about police shootings in Louisiana and Minnesota. This is in Maine, where every officer-involved shooting automatically leads to an investigation by the attorney general and where, for de-

Stereotyping people and calling for action based solely on the color of their skin is just as wrong as stereotyping people based solely on their chosen profession

cadecades, every use of deadly force has been found justified.

The Black Lives Matter-affiliated groups have some legitimate concerns about overcriminalization and mass incarceration. But they do a disservice to those grievances when they focus on “getting mad” and calling for denunciations from groups who have done nothing wrong. And their recent allegations of police brutality against protesters seem a bit self-serving, constructed to fit their narrative, yet not corroborated by any of the several media outlets covering their actions or in accord with the Portland Police Department’s reputation.

Imagine if Augusta police demanded Black Lives Matter denounce the drug dealers arrested in the Wal-Mart parking lot in June. We’d hear accusations of racism and bias — and they would be legitimate. Stereotyping people and calling for action based solely on the color of their skin is just as wrong as stereotyping people based solely on their chosen profession. Or stereotyping based solely on someone’s religion.

Whenever there is a terrorist attack by radical jihadists, you hear calls for every single Muslim to make some sort of denunciation lest they be accused of supporting violence. It is crazy. There are honest, patriotic Muslims throughout this country. Some are like Army Capt. Humayun Khan, the deceased son of a now famous father. Khan was a Muslim who served his country, deploying to Iraq and serving in an area where ISIS’ predecessor was known to operate.

Had he been alive, he would not have been responsible for the acts of Omar Mateen, the Orlando shooter. Mateen pledged himself to ISIS; Khan fought against it. Both were Muslims but could not have been more different. And rather than stereotype them based on some common trait and call for one to denounce the acts of the other, we acknowledge them individually based on what they did. Khan has rightly earned honor, while Mateen nothing but scorn.

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