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Article

"Public service fund could ensure access to the provisions of nuclear power plant operators": Six questions to Claudia Kemfert

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Prof. Dr. Claudia Kemfert is head of the department energy, transportation, environment of DIW Berlin

SIX QUESTIONS TO CLAUDIA KEMFERT

»Public Service Fund Could Ensure Access to the Provisions of Nuclear Power Plant Operators«

1. Ms. Kemfert, the commercial use of nuclear power in Germany is scheduled to be eliminated by 2022. Will the power supply still be reliable after the shutdown of the nuclear power plants? *Yes, the power supply will still be reliable after shutdown of the nuclear power plants. In fact we currently have an electricity supply surplus, and even after the impending shutdown of Grafenrheinfeld's nuclear power plant, this surplus is not going to decrease very much. Using model simulations, we have calculated that we will still have sufficient electricity capacities after 2022. In fact, we will still be an net exporter of electricity.*
2. In June, the Grafenrheinfeld nuclear power plant will be decommissioned. How will the elimination of capacities be compensated for? *At the moment, we have an electricity supply surplus. We are still producing a large proportion (45 percent) of our electricity using coal, and the share of renewable energies has risen sharply. We currently have the paradoxical situation in which modern, highly efficient gas turbine plants are shut down or: not producing electricity because they aren't profitable, because the electricity market price is too low. Nuclear power will be replaced not only by renewable energies – which is happening right now in Southern Germany as well – but also by gas turbine plants and efficient cogeneration.*
3. How much will it cost to dismantle the Grafenrheinfeld nuclear power plant? *The estimated cost of dismantling a nuclear power plant is approximately 1 billion EUR—but we now know from past experiences that the actual cost can be significantly higher. As well, apart from the dismantling of the power plant, there are additional costs emerging from the question of how to deal with the radioactive waste and the radioactive residues prior to their final disposal, which entails that they be stored thousands of years. It is therefore extremely difficult to make cost estimates.*
4. Are the provisions of the plant operators sufficient to cover the costs of the nuclear phase-out? *Quite a few studies show that the costs of the demolition, as well as the costs of the final disposal, may be much greater than the provisions the operating companies have set up. So it becomes a question of what can be done so that the money also remains available. Our recommendation at this juncture is to establish a fund guaranteed by public law. On the one hand, the provisions that have been set up by the operators can flow into these funds. On the other hand, a certain reserve liability should be guaranteed so that society does not end up bearing alone those additional costs that could arise in the end. We have to make sure that the companies share these costs, and therefore our proposal is the establishment of such a fund.*
5. How great is the risk that the nuclear power plant operators will shirk their responsibility? For example, what happens in the event of insolvency? *If an operating company goes bankrupt, we have to pay attention to what happens with the provisions and who actually has access to the assets that a company still has even when it is insolvent. On the one hand, we can use the liability laws to ensure that the provisions are always secure and accessible. But on the other hand that is not a one hundred percent safe approach. Therefore, it would make more sense to set up a fund like the ones that already exist in other countries so that there is the guaranteed possibility of being able to use this money.*
6. It is said that by 2031, a nuclear waste storage site will have been selected. When do you think such a repository will actually be put into service? *That is extremely uncertain; we simply don't know when a mutual agreement will be reached. We already have quite a few decades of discussions behind us—and now the question is, how many more decades are needed before we can finally reach an agreement? We can only hope that the politicians will come to an agreement one day.*

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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