Bulletin: German nuclear exit delivers economic, environmental benefits

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Following the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station in 2011, the German government took the nation's eight oldest reactors offline immediately and passed legislation that will close the last nuclear power plant by 2022. This nuclear phase-out had overwhelming political support in Germany. Elsewhere, many saw it as "panic politics," and the online business magazine Forbes.com went as far as to ask, in a headline, whether the decision was "Insane -- or Just Plain Stupid."

But a special issue of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, published by SAGE, "The German Nuclear Exit," shows that the nuclear shutdown and an accompanying move toward renewable energy are already yielding measurable economic and environmental benefits, with one top expert calling the German phase-out a probable game-changer for the nuclear industry worldwide.

In his overview article, "From Brokdorf to Fukushima: The long journey to nuclear phase-out," Princeton researcher Alexander Glaser puts the German nuclear exit in its historical context, which includes massive, civil war-like confrontations between antinuclear demonstrators and police. Because of longstanding public opposition to nuclear power, by the 1990s few in German political life seriously entertained the idea of new reactor construction. And, Glaser notes, Germany's decision last year to pursue a nuclear phase-out was anything but precipitous; serious planning to shutter the nuclear industry and greatly expand alternative energy production began more than a decade ago. "Germany's nuclear phase-out could provide a proof-of-concept, demonstrating the political and technical feasibility of abandoning a controversial high-risk technology. Germany's nuclear phase-out, successful or not, is likely to become a game changer for nuclear energy worldwide," Glaser concludes.

Also in the Bulletin's special issue on "The German Nuclear Exit": Freie Universität Berlin politics professor Miranda Schreurs says the nuclear phase-out and accompanying shift to renewable energy have brought financial benefits to farmers, investors, and small business; Felix Matthes of the Institute for Applied Ecology in Berlin concludes the phase-out will have only small and temporary effects on electricity prices and the German economy; University of Kassel legal experts Alexander Rossnagel and Anja Hentschel explain why electric utilities are unlikely to succeed in suing the government over the shutdown; and Lutz Mez, co-founder of Freie Universität Berlin's Environmental Policy Research Center, presents what may be the most startling finding of all. The shift to alternative energy sources being pursued in parallel with the German nuclear exit has reached a climate change milestone, Mez writes: "It has actually decoupled energy from economic growth, with the country's energy supply and carbon-dioxide emissions dropping from 1990 to 2011, even as its gross domestic product rose by 36 percent."

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