

The Healthy Fallout From Fukushima

by Paul Starr

The last few years have brought a great deal of talk about a “nuclear renaissance” and a new bipartisan consensus in favor of building more nuclear power plants. In the hope of striking a grand bargain on climate legislation during the last Congress, many environmentalists were willing to go along with what President Obama and others held up

as a sensible compromise: federal subsidies for nuclear power and more leeway for offshore oil drilling in exchange for a carbon cap-and-trade system. But the BP oil spill helped to quash that idea, and the disaster in Japan should bury it. If we are ever going to get global-warming legislation—and with denialists in control of the House, that’s not likely anytime soon—it will have to be some other way.

The idea of a nuclear renaissance was never a good one. Nuclear power is phenomenally more expensive than the alternatives, there is still no solution to the disposal of spent fuel, and as the Fukushima catastrophe illustrates, the potential costs of disaster are so staggering that no private investors will risk the full liability. And that’s just the beginning of the case against going nuclear; the Center for American Progress has a useful list of “10 Reasons Not to Invest in Nuclear Energy,” in which safety comes up only as reason No. 7.

But you don’t have to take it from a liberal think tank. At the American Enterprise Institute in March, John Rowe, the CEO of Exelon—the energy company with the most nuclear reactors

in the United States—said that nuclear power plants are becoming increasingly difficult to justify financially because the costs are far higher than natural gas, which “produces cheaper clean electricity” and will be abundant for decades.

The finance of nuclear plants may be one decision about energy that we would be better off leaving to the market because investors seem to be more rational about it than either the administration or congressional Republicans. In deciding whether to approve new nuclear power plants, state governments have to weigh the likelihood of higher electric utility rates, diminished industrial competitiveness, and local concerns about safety. At the national level, though, there isn’t enough nuclear deterrence. Republicans are ideologically attached to the nuclear option, and Democrats have been willing to concede it in the interest of a deal for the greater good of the planet. If Fukushima forces both parties to reconsider, it could spare us from future disasters.

THE URGENT nuclear-power issue for both state and national policy-makers isn’t

building new reactors; it’s decommissioning old ones that have long outlived their projected lifespan. That’s where the fallout from Fukushima may have its most salutary effect: new attention to the potential hazards of aging nuclear plants like the one at Indian Point on the Hudson River in New York. The Fukushima Daiichi station is about 140 miles from Tokyo, but Indian

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Point is about 35 miles from New York City, and about 20 million people live within a 50-mile radius. Building a reactor there was an act of hubris; after Fukushima, the state needs to figure out how to retire a plant that should never have been located in a metropolitan region.

The one legitimate justification for building new nuclear power plants may be taking older and more dangerous plants out of service. But even in those cases, natural gas and other alternatives may well be a better choice. The United States is fortunate to have reserves of natural gas that can serve as the bridge to a future of

renewables. Crossing that bridge as expeditiously as possible ought to be the focus of policy. Nuclear energy is a mature technology; far from getting cheaper, its costs have steadily escalated. Public investment should develop the technologies that are moving in the other direction with real promise of becoming dramatically less expensive and more efficient.

There will be inconveniences along the way, and many people will not want to make the adjustments in everyday life that a sustainable world demands. If there is one consistent theme in

what conservatives say on energy and climate, it is this: *There’s no real need to change, and you shouldn’t have to.* In the weeks before the Japanese earthquake, Rush Limbaugh and friends were warming up for a great crusade to preserve the incandescent bulb from a 2007 law requiring a 25 percent to 30 percent improvement in energy efficiency by 2012. Then Fukushima put the inconvenience of changing our light bulbs into perspective. Maybe a new bulb that saves you money at home and reduces the need for new generating capacity isn’t such a terrible thing after all. **TAP**