



National column: Keep nuclear in the mix

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By Marc Spitzer and John Hanger

Preserving nuclear facilities ensures a diverse energy supply that doesn't over-rely on any one source of energy, write John Hanger and Marc Spitzer.



July 2017 saw two court rulings both significant and positive for the future of clean energy. Federal courts in New York and Illinois ruled that states have the authority to place an economic value on the zero-emission production of electricity. These rulings establish a precedent for other states to achieve their own goals for sources of electricity that don't emit carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

The noteworthy outcome of the policies upheld by the two courts is that nuclear facilities will continue to operate in New York and Illinois.

Nuclear energy is, by far, the largest source of zero-carbon energy generation in the country. As of last year, it represented 60 percent of the carbon-free electricity in the United States.

Nuclear energy now finds itself pinched between unusually low natural gas prices and rules that promote other carbon-free sources of electricity but exclude nuclear. According to published reports, about half of the existing nuclear fleet is seriously economically stressed. Because nuclear energy represents such a massive share of our carbon-free energy, these circumstances represent a crucial inflection point. Our next steps forward with regard to nuclear will determine the emissions from our nation's electricity supply for the foreseeable future.

Preserving nuclear facilities ensures a diverse energy supply that doesn't over-rely on any one source of energy. This shields customers and businesses from cost increases that may arise from fuel unavailability, fuel price volatility and prospective source-specific changes in regulations.

A diverse energy mix also makes the grid better able to minimize effect and quickly recover from natural disruptions, like storms, as well as from malicious cyber or physical attacks.

Energy Secretary Rick Perry has consistently promoted nuclear as an essential part of the U.S. energy grid including the following remarks, "If you really care about this environment that we live in ... then you need to be a supporter of this amazingly clean, resilient, safe, reliable source of energy."

Ensuring a diverse, resilient energy grid is critical to national and economic security.

In addition, many policy experts anticipate the government will eventually address climate change by placing an economic cost on carbon. If this likely scenario comes to pass, consumers and businesses will gravitate toward the lowest cost carbon-free option still in the mix. Sustaining nuclear is a prudent financial hedge against future energy costs.

Businesses, elected officials, academics and consumers all say the same thing: they value low-carbon energy. But unless state policies and energy markets do the same, many nuclear facilities will close. Once a nuclear plant closes, it cannot be restarted. It is removed from service forever. And with it goes the cheapest and most effective options for keeping carbon emissions from electricity generation in check, leaving only technologies that are more expensive, less effective and not able to produce enough energy to substitute for nuclear power.

It is unlikely that the federal government will materially address this pressing situation. It is, therefore, the states that will face a critical decision: will they erase the progress of more than a decade in terms of carbon emissions? Or will they move forward and preserve our largest sources of zero-emission energy?

The path has been blazed by policymakers in Illinois and New York and paved by the recent court decisions to uphold them. Other states should follow them by pursuing the most practical, economical and expedient means to decarbonization: preserving nuclear energy.

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