

Spurning nuclear energy may prove foolish

A rational voice.

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Although we understand the California Energy Commission's reluctance to lift our state's moratorium on the building of nuclear power plants, it is shortsighted to reject outright such a viable energy source in this era of diminishing fossil fuels.

The commission's April decision was its first comprehensive look at the issue since new nuclear power plants were barred here in 1976. In the interim, nations in Europe, Asia and elsewhere have jumped ahead of us in the use of nuclear power by building plants, honing technology and improving safety — without triggering another Three Mile Island or Chernobyl.

Reconsideration is natural given rising oil prices, our reliance on coal and natural gas for power plants, the prospect of an energy crisis, and increased calls for power here and abroad. Our energy future is uncertain. The day is coming, experts say, when we will have to rely on something other than fossil fuels to meet day-to-day energy needs. Nuclear power remains a viable option for electricity.

The commission's primary rationale for rejecting the revival of nuclear power plants in California was that it makes little sense if we do not have safe ways to store or dispose of nuclear waste. Commissioner John Geesman said, "The disposal of waste is an extraordinarily important threshold question for the increased reliance of nuclear power."

He is right. The United States has not resolved questions about where or how to dispose of nuclear waste generated at such plants. Most of it is now stored at nuclear plant sites and nobody wants residue buried in their backyard. That's a hurdle we have to clear before the public accepts the resurrection of nuclear power for peaceful purposes.

Still, we get 13 percent of our electricity from three nuclear plants. California has long recognized the potential threat nuclear energy poses if not handled and disposed of properly. If we reconsider our ban, the state must make sure it has responsible, experienced plant operators as well as regulations and safeguards ensuring such facilities are safe, well-managed and have acceptable ways of disposing of the waste they generate.

But given mankind's insatiable appetite for power, it is foolish to dismiss nuclear energy as part of the solution. It is one component we must consider as competition for oil increases and the supply shrinks.

We cannot hold onto old fears and phobias. It is foolish to consider nuclear energy a bogeyman. Nuclear-powered vehicles may be impractical, but the energy is a reliable source of electricity.

To survive and thrive in our rapidly evolving world, California must invest in finding, developing and implementing alternative power from the options that present themselves. Nuclear energy is one we must consider.