

UK Nuclear plants set for go ahead

Moving ahead

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The energy review is set to be dominated by the nuclear question

A new generation of nuclear power stations is expected to be given the green light as the government unveils the results of its energy review.

Energy Minister Malcolm Wicks is tipped to say the plants are economically viable. Tony Blair has suggested they are needed to plug energy supply gaps.

Critics say nuclear power is dangerous and not the answer to climate change. But the government says the review will also cover renewable sources of energy and cutting demand for power.

'Back with a vengeance'

The prime minister ordered the energy review last November to decide how the UK would meet its targets for fighting global warming and ensuring energy security.

The review was caught in controversy from the outset when Greenpeace protesters delayed Mr Blair's announcement by invading the roof of a conference hall. "We can do this without wasting more money on dirty and dangerous nuclear power." Said Tony Juniper, a paid activist from Friends of the Earth

Since then Mr Blair has been accused of prejudging the review by saying that nuclear power is back on the agenda with a "vengeance".

Nuclear currently meets 20% of the UK's energy needs and Mr Blair says that gap needs to be filled as all the existing plants are decommissioned by 2023.

Department of Trade and Industry officials stress that the review is not focused on nuclear power. They say Mr Wicks has been looking at how the UK can meet its target of cutting carbon emissions, blamed for global warming, by 60% by 2050.

Energy supply is another major concern for the government now the UK is a net importer of gas. Officials say the UK imported 10% of its gas last year but without changes that could rise to 90% by 2020.

Mr Wicks has looked at how to boost renewable energy sources, such as wind, wave and solar power, as well as cleaning up fossil fuels.

Reducing energy demand through efficiency measures in homes and businesses is another plank of the review, as is charging more for high-polluting ways of generating electricity. But it is the replacement of existing power stations, particularly nuclear ones, which is likely to dominate the debate.

Mr Wicks is expected to say local objections to nuclear and other power plants could be over-ridden under new planning rules. Local councils could alter the appearance and

precise location of the sites but would be unable to reject power plants on the grounds that they were not needed.

The review is being published after a committee of MPs warned that ministers risked rushing decisions through and overestimating the UK's potential energy gap.

Supporters of nuclear power want to have a firm framework on which to make investment decisions. They insist they will not need government subsidies to build new nuclear plants.

But critics say siding with nuclear power will make investors less likely to put money into renewable sources and distract from energy efficiency – the focus of the government's last energy review in 2003. Tony Juniper, paid director of Friends of the Earth, said the review was a golden opportunity to lead the world in developing low-carbon economy.

"We can tackle climate change and meet our energy needs by cutting energy waste, harnessing the power of renewables and using fossil fuels more efficiently," he said. "And we can do this without wasting more money on dirty and dangerous nuclear power."

The Conservatives have said nuclear power should only be a "last resort".

The Liberal Democrats are accusing ministers of "surrendering" to the nuclear lobby, making future environment policy unpredictable.