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## Absorbing the nuclear fallout

**Disaster in Japan underscores risks of nuclear power. But the lesson isn't to make safer plants — it's to embrace renewables, conservation.**

**By Jim Warren**

Charlotte faces a critical and timely choice over which energy and economic path to travel.

The revival of U.S. nuclear power has been dominated in recent years by exuberance fueled by industry hype. Several weeks before Japan's tragedy, former Nuclear Regulatory Commission member **Peter Bradford** declared the U.S. nuclear renaissance "in shambles." Most projects in free-market states are sidelined due to soaring cost estimates and what Moody's analysts call a "bet the farm risk" of failure. Plants under way by the French and others have suffered massive cost overruns and delays.

It's too early to know the impact of Japan's emergency on public health and the industry. But new projects worldwide likely will be delayed as the events at Fukushima are analyzed, and changes are debated in plant design, regulation and emergency planning. Damage to Japanese manufacturing will be a factor.

Fukushima is one of many scenarios that could cause entire sectors of the nuclear industry to collapse. Overnight, that facility was converted from a profitable asset to a multibillion-dollar liability.

It doesn't take tragedy to compel the abandonment of plants. More than 90 U.S. reactors were cancelled midstream during the 1970s and '80s — mostly due to mismanagement, according to *Forbes* magazine.

Those failures bankrupted utilities and cost customers and stockholders more than \$300 billion in current dollars.

Proponents say new designs are better. Perhaps so, but so far only on paper. The Westinghouse AP1000 was chosen by most Southern utilities as the least-expensive model — although litigation is likely because critics insist its price reflects safety compromises. Still, cost estimates continue rising, the AP1000 has never been built. It has suffered years of thorny design problems prior to licensing and construction.

Only in a few Southern states with monopoly markets are utilities considering new reactors. The core question is whether their stockholders or customers should bear the risks.

[Duke Energy Corp.](#) won't take the gamble unless customers pay up front for its Lee Nuclear Station. There will be no refund if the multibillion dollar project fails. But even that's not enough; Duke is now pressing legislators to allow automatic annual rate hikes that could raise power bills by 50%.

Meanwhile, a worldwide energy revolution is under way, and private money is going into renewable and efficiency technologies.

Recent studies show solar and wind — used in combination — can provide 75% of North Carolina's round-the-clock electricity needs, especially with smart-grid advances.

NC WARN has urged Duke CEO **Jim Rogers** to use the company's clout to help slow the clear and accelerating climate crisis that's fueling bizarre weather extremes and pushing the planet toward catastrophic environmental and economic tipping points.

Leading experts insist we must stop burning coal worldwide by 2030. Duke correctly promotes nuclear as low carbon, but the company's plan is for expansion of lucrative generation capacity, not closing big coal plants.

If new nuclear plants could help with climate change, I would be advocating their construction. Instead, pursuing nuclear is squandering precious time and money. For a fraction of the cost, efficiency programs can quickly provide far greater emissions reductions, allow the phase-out of all coal plants and the advance of a statewide solar, wind and cogeneration economy.

Rogers touts Duke's \$1.7 billion in wind investments, but that's in states with competitive power markets. North Carolina leads the East Coast in offshore wind-power capacity, but Duke's forecasts include minuscule amounts of wind, solar and efficiency by 2030.

Duke can steer this state into the 21st century, or spend more years fighting for new nuclear projects, a struggle we would all lose.

Duke Energy is well positioned to help lead the world in the urgently needed shift to a renewable-energy economy. Many Duke workers would relish that heroic role and the public appreciation that would accompany it. I deeply hope Rogers has enough vision to recognize this opportunity.

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