France electricity safety

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As a particularly cold winter settles on Europe, France finds itself experiencing peak electricity demand close to the historic peak recorded in 2012. Because of the country’s significant reliance on electricity for winter-time heating, an additional 2.4 gigawatts (GW) of power is needed for every 1°C drop in temperature – roughly the equivalent of two average nuclear plants.

With a series of nuclear power station shutdowns for maintenance, which took 9 GW of nuclear capacity offline out of a total of 63 GW, the country now finds itself facing electricity supply constraints. While electricity systems are designed with such cases in mind, 2017 has brought a particular set of challenges for France, as highlighted in the recently published Energy Policies of IEA Countries: France 2016 Review.

Importing electricity is an option – France has completed a small electricity interconnection with Spain and has plans for additional subsea interconnections – though this depends on how much neighbouring countries have to spare. Supply is also tight in the United Kingdom, and Belgium is in the process of shutting down its own nuclear power plants, a policy that the IEA cautioned last year could challenge efforts to ensure electricity security.

Aside from generating more power or buying it from neighbours, France has put in place a range of policy measures to ensure electricity security during this period of winter peak demand. This includes a multi-year energy plan with new demand response rules, including a capacity market that will allow all network operators to participate in all the sale of electricity, creating a competitive environment between conventional energy suppliers and system operators. In addition, the rollout of smart meters has begun, allowing more demand response through dynamic pricing.

In addition to these steps, the government will need to ensure that the French nuclear industry is able to face the challenges ahead, including the life-time extensions and new nuclear reactors, according to the IEA analysis. This is also important for the rest of the European Union, as the outlook of nuclear power in France has an impact on the interconnected EU electricity market and the energy security of neighbouring countries, including Belgium and Germany.

As it moves to a target of 50% of electricity generation from nuclear, France will need to be attentive to possible changes in energy demand and supply – including weather-related challenges – with a view to guarantee continuous security of electricity supply and maintain a low carbon footprint.

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Web: https://www.sumthingtasty.co.za/contact-us/
Email: energystorage2000@gmail.com
WhatsApp: 8613816583346