Advocacy group pushes for extending life of Ontario nuclear facility set for closure

By Jessica McDiarmid | News | July 28th 2022

The Pickering nuclear facility, which supplies 14 per cent of Ontario's electricity, is set for closure by 2025. Photo by JasonParis / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0)

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A nuclear energy advocacy group is calling for Ontario to extend the life of the Pickering nuclear power plant as the province faces an impending electricity crunch.

In a report released Thursday, Canadians for Nuclear Energy argued closing the 50-year-old facility east of Toronto in 2025 as planned will lead to job losses, greenhouse gas emission increases, heightened reliance on imported natural gas and a "dire" capacity deficit on Ontario's power grid.

That view contrasts starkly with many environmental organizations that cite concerns about safety as well as the feasibility, or lack thereof, of refurbishing the Pickering plant to extend its lifetime, and argue for increased focus on other means of supplying the growing demand for emissions-free energy in the province.

Canadians for Nuclear Energy president Chris Keefer said it's a choice between nuclear and fossil fuels to power the grid.

"Climate concern is really what drove this," said Keefer. "There's no debate about what Pickering will be replaced with."

The Pickering facility currently provides 14 per cent of Ontario's electricity. Sixty per cent of the province's power overall comes from nuclear, which largely facilitated Ontario's shift away from coal-fired power generation to one of the world's cleanest grids, with 94 per cent emissions-free electricity.

But as demand for electricity rises, the ability of the province's aging nuclear facilities to power it is dwindling. Ontario's other two nuclear plants, Darlington and Bruce, are being refurbished to extend their lifetimes and will operate at reduced capacity for the coming years.

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When the current Progressive Conservative government was first elected in 2018, it cancelled more than 750 renewable energy projects that were, in part, meant to fill gaps on the grid left by the drop in nuclear power. Ontario now intends to make up the shortfall by burning natural gas, a move expected to increase emissions 375 per cent by 2030. Natural gas now provides seven per cent of the province's annual energy, but that use increases up to 30 per cent during high-demand periods like summer heat waves.

Reverting to fossil fuels would deal a major blow to the province's economic competitiveness as industries — from transport to steelmaking to electric vehicle manufacturing — seek to electrify to meet emission reduction targets. Premier Doug Ford campaigned heavily in 2022 on investments in the electric vehicle and battery industry.

Canadians for Nuclear Energy, which is largely funded by unions representing power industry workers, wrote in its report that the Pickering facility's B station could be refurbished to extend its lifespan by 30 to 40 years, The investment of $8.8 billion to $10 billion "is a cost-competitive way to maintain Ontario's low-carbon electricity and preserve the supply chain expertise and 7,600 direct and indirect full-time-equivalent jobs that Pickering provides," it said.

Increasing reliance on natural gas, it posited, would make the province more vulnerable to price volatility and geopolitics, and knock the province off its low-emissions pedestal. "A clean electricity grid serves as the backbone of Ontario's efforts to reduce emissions by electrifying transportation, heating and industry," it read. "Electric vehicles and electric arc steelmaking furnaces are only as clean as the electricity that powers them."

Shawn-Patrick Stensil, a Greenpeace program director who has worked on nuclear issues for 20 years, said framing the future of the Pickering facility as a choice between nuclear or natural gas is a "false dichotomy."

"The demand for refurbishment or reconstruction is, I think, a distraction for the real debate that we need to have, which is: How do we replace the station in the near-term with renewable energy, storage and conservation?" said Stensil.

Ontario decided in 2010 not to refurbish Pickering due to high costs, risks of poor performance and other concerns. A minister's briefing note from that time said the facility did not meet modern standards and had potential defects that, if discovered during the refurbishment process, might make it impossible.

"We should have been planning for that closure then," said Stensil. Now, with the plant's operating licence set to expire, there isn't time for regulatory approval anyway, he said.

Jack Gibbons, chair of the Ontario Clean Air Alliance, said the Pickering facility lacks modern safety features, even as it operates in a densely populated area. And it's neither necessary to continue to use Pickering nor to rely on natural gas, he said, though that is what the current government intends to do, a move Gibbons called "climate and economic lunacy."

Ontario can prevent deficiencies in its grid by promoting energy efficiency, sourcing power from renewables like wind and solar, and importing hydro-generated electricity from Quebec, said Gibbons, a former commissioner of Toronto Hydro.

“It simply doesn’t make any sense to continue to operate Pickering nuclear station when we have cleaner, safer and lower cost options,” he said.

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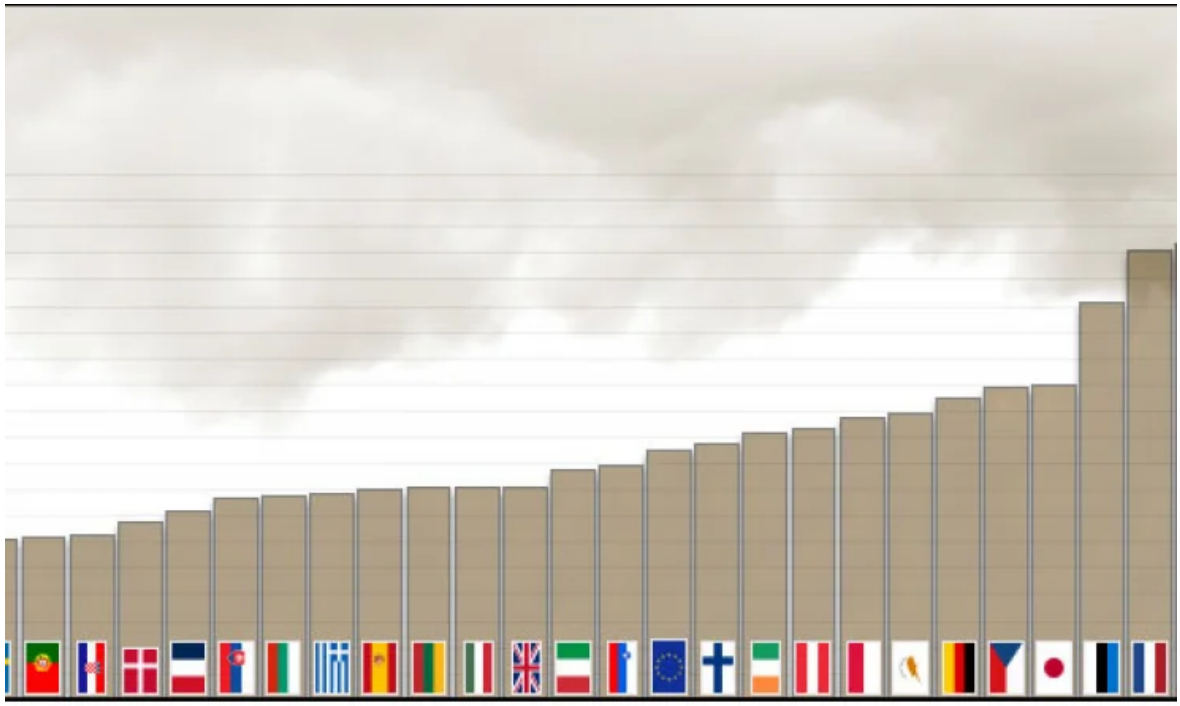

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