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Réseau Sortir du nucléaire > Archives > Revue de presse > **France to close five nuclear reactors ?**

13 février 2018

## France to close five nuclear reactors ?

by [Craig Morris](#)

12 Feb 2018

Without any official announcement having been made, French nuclear reactor operator EDF seems poised to close up to five reactors next year. What will this mean for the French energy market ? Craig Morris investigates.

You would think, given French plans to transition from nuclear to renewables, that the sudden possibility of five reactors closing in a single year would draw some attention. The country has 58, so the closure of all five would equal 9% of the total. And although the original transition plan was adopted in 2015, not a single reactor has yet been closed – making five at once all the more striking.

Over at EDF's website, downtimes are published. For [Flamanville 2](#), [Golfech 1](#), [Nogent 1](#), and [Tricastin 2](#), there are announcements of "modulation weeks" scheduled for the beginning of 2019. So far, so normal – but then there is the following sentence :

***The positioning of this modulation week is provisional : it will be reassessed and the plant will be restarted if economically justified.***

This sentence is highly unusual and probably unprecedented. Apparently, EDF is considering keeping these four nuclear reactors closed because of economics.

That doesn't mean they will close ; it's possible that the company is just jockeying for better terms. In 2017, wholesale futures prices for baseload in 2020 came in at around 35 euros per megawatt-hour ; extending the service lives of France's aging fleet from 40 to 50 years has been [estimated to require](#) a price of at least 55 euros.

By declaring these reactors economically unfeasible, EDF could pull some generation capacity off the market, thereby boosting wholesale prices for the remaining fleet. This step could then also be spun as part of the country's energy transition to renewables. But nothing at all has been reported about this matter. In the only relevant coverage on the web, [Platts merely states](#) that the French nuclear power production fell "to a record low" in the fourth quarter of 2017, and that the four reactors

mentioned above will be taken off-line in this summer for “additional fuel-saving outages.” No mention is made of possible permanent closures in 2019. I could find no reports at all in French.

The fifth EDF reactor in question is Paluel 2. During an upgrade, when the facility was off, a 465-ton generator fell off a crane within the facility in March 2016, [causing an earthquake](#). [Reuters reports](#) that the reopening scheduled to take place in April has now been postponed to June 2018, but EDF’s message leaves even that prolonged date open : “The duration of unavailability revised and may change according to multiple assessments and ongoing works.”

By law, French reactors automatically close permanently if they have been down for two years. In the case of Paluel 2, the postponement would put it beyond that deadline. But the French government saw this mess coming ; last April, the (former) Environmental Minister Royal extended the deadline by another two years in a decree ([in French](#)). The law currently allows an extension of up to three years. As the French press reported ([in French](#)) at the time, the reactor was originally to be put back into operation in March 2017 – the month before the decree – but the date had been postponed to August and then subsequently to November 2017. The restart of Paluel has thus been postponed four times.

That report calls the accident “spectacular and unprecedented” and adds that postponing the deadline for reopening a reactor in order to prevent a permanent shutdown – the report was published a month before the decree – would also be “unprecedented.”

A sixth reactor is also in question. This one, Fessenheim, was expected – six years ago – to be the first one to be closed, but only in exchange for a new EPR reactor at Flamanville (which has yet to open). But even without Flamanville, the closure of Fessenheim is proving difficult. In January, French President Macron appointed Ecology and Solidarity Undersecretary Sbastien Lecornu to decide on the matter ([report in French](#)), a sign that the decision is highly political.

In official statements, EDF remains adamant about keeping all reactors open. At the end of January, it announced that no other reactor should be closed after Fessenheim until 2029 ([report in French](#)). But just days later, it quietly volunteered to shut down four reactors on economic grounds in 2019.

EDF did not respond to requests for comments for this report.

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