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22 octobre 2014

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Source : BBC News

<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-29715796>

Wind farms outstrip nuclear power

21 October 2014 Last updated at 23:07 GMT

By Roger Harrabin BBC environment analyst

The UK's wind farms generated more power than its nuclear power stations on Tuesday, the National Grid says.

The energy network operator said it was caused by a combination of high winds and faults in nuclear plants.

Wind farms are causing controversy in rural areas and the government is choking off planning permission for new sites.

But for a 24-hour period yesterday, spinning blades produced more energy than splitting atoms.

Wind made up 14.2% of all generation and nuclear offered 13.2%.

It follows another milestone on Saturday, when wind generated a record amount of power - 6,372 MW, according to National Grid.

This formed nearly 20% of the the UK's electricity, albeit at a time at the weekend when demand is relatively low.

Reactors down

But wind power's ascendancy over nuclear is expected to be temporary.

The situation is caused by windy conditions boosting the output from turbines at a time when eight

out of the UK's 15 nuclear reactors are offline.

EDF Energy said current ageing reactors are down for a number of reasons :

- Sizewell B is in the middle of a planned "statutory outage" for maintenance and refuelling
- Hunterston B Reactor 4 is down for maintenance, expected back in early November
- At Dungeness B, one unit is being refuelled and the other is expected back online soon after being shut down after a fault on a boiler pump was discovered
- The four reactors at Heysham and Hartlepool were taken offline in August after a crack was found on a boiler spine.

'Convenient whipping boy'

A government spokesman said a "diverse energy mix" was essential to the UK's energy security.

"We're preventing a predicted energy crunch by turning round a legacy of underinvestment and neglect.

"To deliver this, we need a diverse energy mix that includes renewable sources like wind and solar alongside nuclear and technologies like carbon capture and storage so we can continue to use fossil fuels in a cleaner way."

But wind energy has proved controversial in rural areas and among some politicians.

Last week the former environment secretary Owen Paterson condemned the wind industry for soaking up subsidies, producing a "paltry" amount of power and ruining landscapes. He called instead for a new generation of mini nuclear plants dotted around the country.

The government is offering more generous subsidies to nuclear than wind in the long term.

But Jennifer Webber, a spokeswoman for RenewableUK, the trade body, said : "Wind power is often used as a convenient whipping boy by political opponents and vested interests.

"All the while, it's been quietly powering millions of homes across the UK and providing a robust response to its vocal detractors."