

Earth Hour: Switch it off, switch it off!

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Tomorrow night's Earth Hour, when people worldwide will switch off their lights between 20:30 and 21:30 as a symbolic gesture in the fight against climate change and in favour of cleaner energy, comes amid threats of power outages in South Africa.

This year, Earth Hour's theme is "switch off and switch over". The latter is a challenge to shift to greener energy sources, says Saliem Fakir, head of the environmental group WWF South Africa's Living Planet unit.

The current pressure on the power grid does not look good in the run-up to the winter, when demand grows, says Fakir.

The positive side is that the government has set the ball rolling with renewable energy. Two rounds of the green power purchase program has been completed and 2 500 MW of wind and solar power will be available over the next four years.

Fakir concedes it is still not enough, but the preference for large-scale power projects is problematic. Because it will take longer to complete Eskom's Medupi power station, Eskom's expensive diesel power stations at Atlantis and Mossel Bay will be required to run much longer.

Interesting is the dichotomy in the government on nuclear power. While deputy president. Kgalema Motlanthe and Dipuo Peters, Minister of Energy, were strongly positive this week about its future in South Africa, the national planning commission warns that new nuclear power stations would be too expensive.

Fakir said because of the economic downturn and higher power prices, plans in which nuclear power is considered essential are now obsolete because power consumption is no longer rising so sharply as expected.

There is strong evidence that the cost increases of new nuclear power stations are becoming sharper, especially since safety standards after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan intensified in 2011. Already a nuclear power station being built in Finland, has been delayed and will cost 50% more than planned.

The problem with large-scale nuclear power projects is that developers deliberately underestimate costs so the project is approved, because they know it's very difficult to stop a building project once it has been started.

Fakir believes that, where it was initially estimated that South Africa will need 80 000 MW of power capacity by 2030, only 65 000 MW may be needed in stead.

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