

A bright nuclear future: true or false?

Britain has identified 10 'suitable sites' for next-generation nuclear power plants. Here's a list of awkward questions



- - - [Jeremy Leggett](#)
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If you think the Labour government has done the right thing in its decision to [expand nuclear power in the UK by 50%](#), see how you fare with this quiz. Are the following dozen statements true or false?

- 1) The independent French nuclear safety authority posts French nuclear incidents on its website, all [800-a-year of them](#).
- 2) One of the two reactors Areva is building as forerunners for the 12 that will supposedly be built in the UK, the Olkiluoto plant in Finland, has fallen [far behind schedule and over budget](#) and the French company is locked in a legal battle over the overruns with the end user, the utility company TVO. The second reactor, at Flamanville in France, is also way behind schedule.
- 3) The Finnish nuclear regulator has attacked Areva for fielding experts in the reactor-building programme who have a "[lack of professional knowledge](#)".
- 4) A spate of nuclear leaks has forced the French government to [address public fears](#) by ordering drilling into, and sampling, of the groundwater under all 58 French nuclear reactors.
- 5) This July, a heatwave shut a third of French reactors, because rivers became too hot to act as coolant. France was [forced to import electricity from the UK](#).
- 6) Things got little better as winter approached. With almost one third of France's reactors out of service for maintenance and other reasons, France will have to import electricity at peak hours [during the winter](#) – for the second year running – to avoid the risk of blackouts.
- 7) French government ministers and officials had to [cancel their visits](#) to the flagship Cadarache nuclear facility after kilograms of plutonium dust were discovered on the site.
- 8) There were [1,767 leaks, breakdowns, or other safety "events"](#) at British nuclear plants between 2001 and 2008. A Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) report says about half were serious enough "to have had the potential to challenge a nuclear safety system".

9) [A radioactive leak, undiscovered for 14 months](#), was found at Sellafield just before a visit by the prime minister. A board of inquiry concluded the leak went unnoticed because "managerial controls over the line were insufficient and there was inadequate inspection". Meanwhile, elsewhere on the site two containers of highly radioactive material went missing. The operator said it was most likely that "the anomaly lies within the accounting procedures".

10) Sellafield Ltd [has admitted](#) its £1.8bn nuclear reprocessing plant may not be able to meet NII orders for operation, as a result of continuing technical problems. Two of the plants have been breaking down repeatedly, and the third has been closed after a rise in radiation levels. Work has started on a new £100m evaporator, but it is behind schedule, and probably won't come on stream before 2013. Germany may sue if spent fuel is not returned reprocessed. Closure of the plant would slow decommissioning of British nuclear plants, and remove much of the £70bn needed for that process, which reprocessing at Thorp was supposed to raise a good deal of, meaning another drain on the British public's taxes.

11) The NII, charged with overseeing all such problems, has an acute [staff shortage](#). The Health and Safety Executive, for its part wants to create "exclusions" in its assessment of new reactor designs, in order to "streamline" the process.

12) Nuclear safety authorities from France, Finland and UK have asked Areva to [modify its EPR reactor design](#). They have concerns over the "independence principle", and profess there is too high a degree of interactivity between the control and safety systems.