

# France shuts oldest reactors, but nuclear power still reigns

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France is finally shutting the country's two oldest nuclear reactors, at the Fessenheim nuclear power plant in Alsace, nearly 10 years after first announcing their shutdown.

France will start closing its oldest atomic power plant on Saturday after

43 years in operation, the first in a series of reactor shutdowns but hardly a signal the country will reduce its reliance on nuclear energy anytime soon.

Unplugging the two reactors at Fessenheim, along the Rhine near France's eastern border with Germany and Switzerland, became a key goal of anti-nuclear campaigners after the catastrophic meltdown at Fukushima in Japan in 2011.

Experts have noted that construction and [safety standards](#) at Fessenheim, brought online in 1977, fall far short of those at Fukushima, with some warning that seismic and flooding risks in the Alsace region had been underestimated.

Despite a pledge by ex-president Francois Hollande just months after Fukushima to close the plant, it was not until 2018 that President Emmanuel Macron's government gave the final green light.

"This marks a first step in France's energy strategy to gradually re-balance nuclear and renewable electricity sources, while cutting [carbon emissions](#) by closing coal-fired plants by 2022," Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said in a statement Wednesday.

The first reactor will start being shut down on Saturday and the second on June 30, though it will be several months before they go cold and the used fuel can start to be removed.

France will still be left with 56 pressurised water reactors at 18 nuclear power plants—only the United States has more reactors, at 98—generating an unmatched 70 percent of its electricity needs.

Just months after his 2017 election, Macron infuriated environmental activists by abandoning a 2015 target to reduce nuclear in France's

energy mix to just half by 2025.

He staunchly defends the use of what he calls "zero carbon" [nuclear energy](#) in coming decades, putting him at odds with fellow EU giant Germany, which swore to drop nuclear power in the wake of the Fukushima disaster.

"Pretending that we should speed up nuclear plant closures... would force us to reopen coal-fired plants in the coming years," Macron said at the UN's COP23 climate change conference in Bonn in 2017.

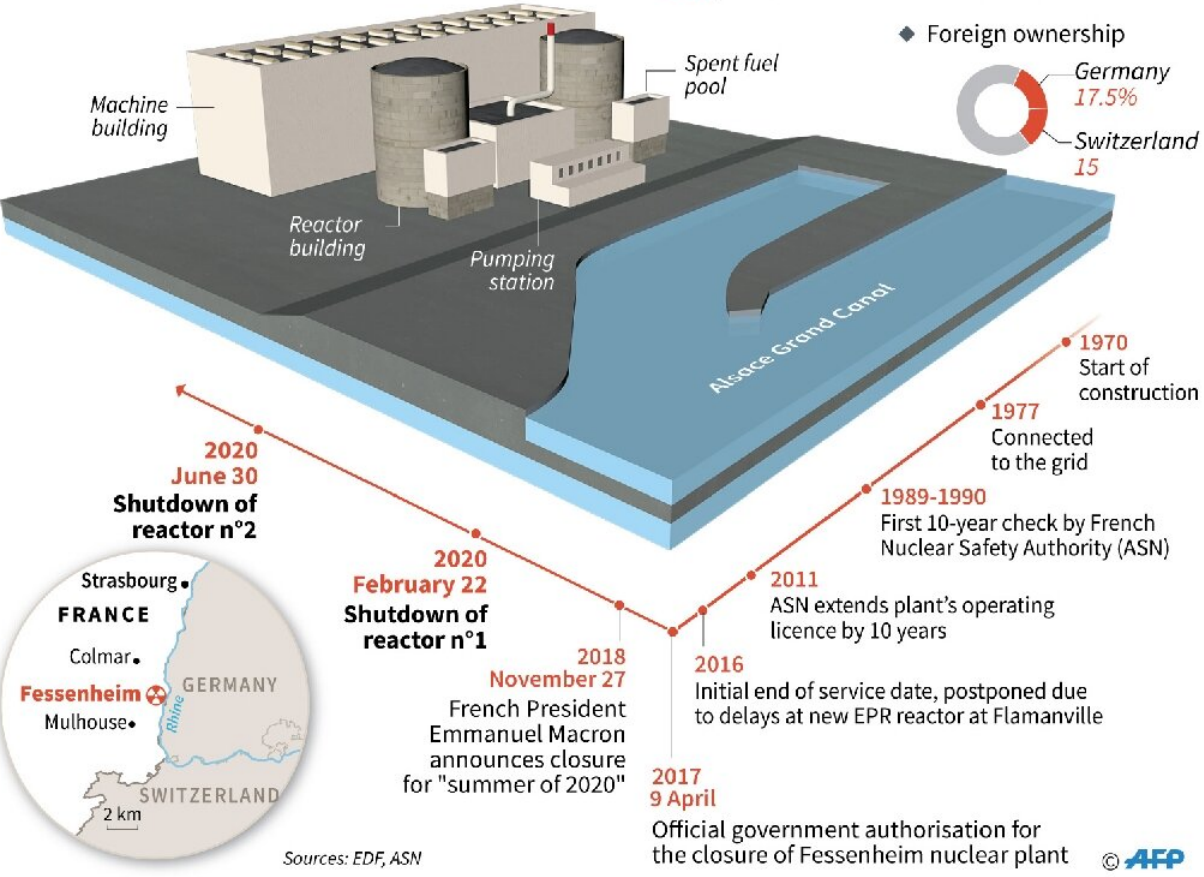
## **Post-war legacy**

The government confirmed in January that it aims to shut down 12 more reactors nearing or exceeding their original 40-year age limit by 2035, when nuclear power should represent just 50 percent of its energy mix.

But at the same time, state-owned energy giant EDF is racing to get its first next-generation reactor running at the Flamanville plant in 2022—10 years behind schedule—and more may be in the pipeline.

# France's Fessenheim nuclear plant to close

- ◆ 2,900 MW reactors
- ◆ 3% of French energy consumption (2018)
- ◆ 980 jobs, direct and indirect (2018)



Details and key dates in the closure of France's Fessenheim nuclear power plant.

France's embrace of nuclear dates back to World War II hero Charles de Gaulle, who created the CEA atomic energy commission as soon as 1945 as part of his rush to restore the nation's sovereignty.

The plants have been a boon for regional economies, where many officials now fear the loss of high-paying jobs. At Fessenheim alone, just 60 EDF workers will remain once dismantling operations start in

2025, a fraction of the 650 today.

The government has promised financial aid to offset the blow and to help workers and subcontractors find other jobs in a part of eastern France where traditional industry has withered in recent decades.

It has also announced investments in biogas and wind energy production, though climate activists say France should be aiming much higher, noting that solar and wind now account for 40 percent of Germany's electricity production.

"Steps have been taken in this direction but they remain insufficient," Greenpeace France said this week.

## **Wary neighbours**

France's insistence on nuclear has increasingly irritated Germany and Switzerland, which are minority owners of the Fessenheim site and have long called for its closure.

As far back as 2007, France's ASN nuclear safety regulator faulted EDF over a series of accidents and security failures at the plant.

Operating standards at Fessenheim "are well below current requirements," said Christian Kuppers, a nuclear physicist at the Oeko-Institut in Darmstadt, Germany.

Beside the earthquake and flooding risks, he noted that Fessenheim was not built to withstand the threat of terrorists sparking a meltdown by crashing a plane into the site.

"All nuclear plants are potentially very dangerous," said Marco Greiner, spokesman for the city government of Basel, one of several Swiss

municipalities that have demanded Fessenheim's shutdown.

Polls also show growing resistance among the French population—industry analysts point to a benchmark survey from October 2018 showing a majority of 53 percent against the technology.

In September, the ASN began distributing radioactivity-blocking iodine pills to 2.2 million people living near [nuclear power plants](#), to be taken in case of radiation leaks.

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