

Support for New Nuclear Power Plants Remains High, Even as Energy Concerns Begin to Wane

by Ann Stouffer Bisconti, Ph.D.

A new national survey finds that the dramatic increases in public support for nuclear energy have held at high levels, despite lower public concern about energy shortages. Almost two-thirds of U.S. adults continue to support definitely building new

nuclear power plants, and there is near public consensus on renewing federal licenses of existing nuclear power plants that meet federal safety standards.

The nationwide survey for the Nuclear Energy Institute was

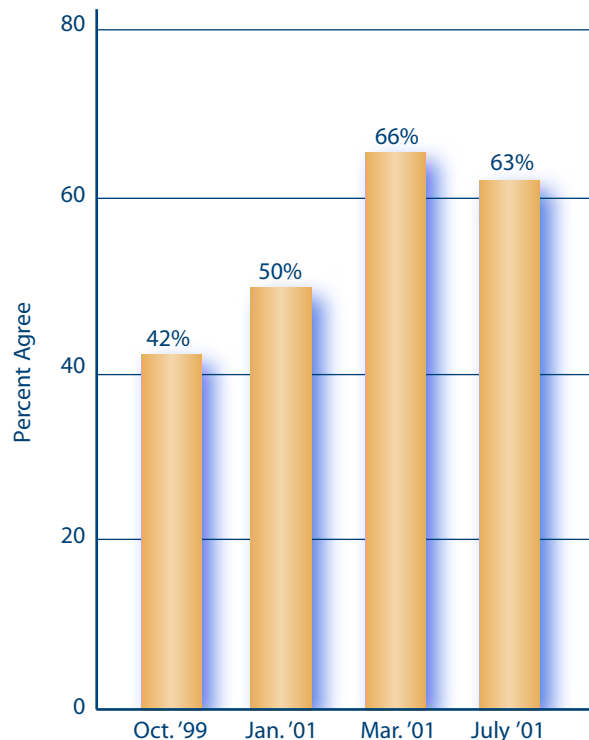
conducted July 6-8 and included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 U.S. adults. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points. The survey was conducted by Bisconti Research, Inc. with Bruskin Research.

Nearly Two-Thirds Agree That U.S. Should Build New Nuclear Plants

In July, 63 percent agreed that “we should definitely build more nuclear energy plants in the future.” Public support for building new nuclear power plants essentially has remained at the same high level as in March, considering a three percentage-point margin of error.

Percent Agreeing We Should Definitely Build More Nuclear Energy Plants in the Future

⁴ *Question:* “Please tell me if you personally strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: We should definitely build more nuclear energy plants in the future.”



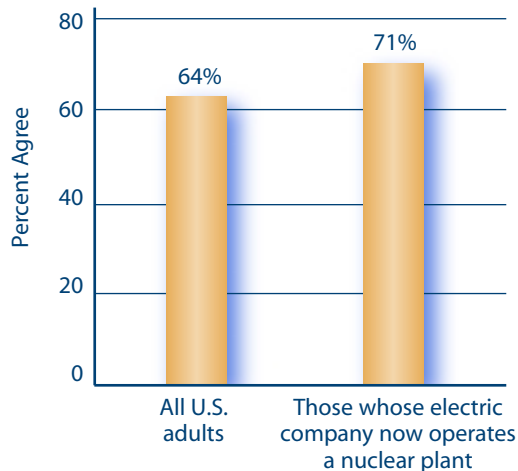
Regional Trends: Percent Agreeing We Should Definitely Build More Nuclear Energy Plants in the Future

4 *Question:* “Please tell me if you personally strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: We should definitely build more nuclear energy plants in the future.”

	Oct. 1999	Jan. 2001	Mar. 2001	July 2001	Change Since Oct. 1999
All U.S.	42	51	66	63	+21
West	33	52	62	63	+30
Midwest	42	53	68	64	+22
Northeast	40	49	62	56	+16
South	49	52	68	67	+18

Percent Saying It Would Be Acceptable To Add a Nuclear Power Plant at the Nearest Existing Site

4 *Question:* “If a new power plant were needed to supply electricity, would it be acceptable to you or not acceptable to you to add a nuclear power plant next to the nearest nuclear power plants that are already operating?”



Sixty-four percent said that if a new power plant is needed to supply electricity, they would find it acceptable to add a new nuclear power plant next to the nearest nuclear power plants that are already operating. Among those who said that their electric company operates a nuclear power plant, 71 percent said that they would find it acceptable to add a new nuclear power plant next to the nearest existing nuclear power plants.

The dramatic change in just a few months in support for building nuclear power plants can be attributed to renewed public attention to energy issues and electricity supply needs.

This support for nuclear energy has held steady even though recent public opinion surveys have found indicators of a possible shift back to energy complacency. A CBS News/*New York Times* poll in June found that only 36 percent believed that energy shortages are real.

A Gallup poll reported that the number of Americans who were very concerned about the energy situation declined from 58 percent in early May to 47 percent in early July. Still, Gallup’s July figure is higher than at any time from 1979 until the May survey.

In the Bisconti/Bruskin July survey, 26 percent said they were concerned about loss of power due to shortages of electricity in the next six months. This concern is highest in the West.

For the United States as a whole, public support for building new nuclear power plants has increased 21 percentage points since October 1999. In the West, where electricity supply shortages have been more acute, public support is up 30 percentage points.

A majority of all demographic groups—men, women, different age groups, and those who consider themselves environmentalists and opinion leaders—agree that the electric industry should definitely build nuclear power plants in the future.

Concern About Loss of Power Due to Electricity Shortages

4 *Question:* “Do you have concerns about loss of power due to shortages of electricity in the next six months?”

	Total %	West %	Midwest %	Northeast %	South %
Yes	26	40	17	20	27
No	72	58	83	77	72
Don't know	2	2	0	3	1

The Bisconti/Bruskin survey also shows a decline in concern about energy prices and U.S. energy security between March and July. Both surveys asked how much priority the president and Congress should assign to five goals as part of national policy.

Reliable energy supply and environmental protection continued to rank highest. However, the numbers of Americans who would give high priority to stabilizing prices and increasing energy independence slipped significantly between March and July.

Percent Saying Energy Goals Should Receive High Priority

4 *Question:* “In developing a national energy policy, should the president and Congress give high, medium or low priority to each of the following goals?”

	March 2001	July 2001	Change
Assuring a reliable energy supply	81	76	-5
Protecting the environment	74	73	-1
Improving air quality	69	71	-2
Stabilizing prices	65	55	-10
Increasing energy independence	62	53	-9

Public Supports Preparing Now To Build New Nuclear Power Plants

The vast majority of Americans continue to support planning ahead for building new nuclear power plants, according to the July survey.

Three-fourths (76 percent) agreed with the statement, “Considering the electricity shortages in California and other states, electric utilities should prepare now so that new nuclear power plants could be built if needed in the next five years.” Nearly half agreed strongly, and only 11 percent disagreed strongly.

Also, 74 percent agreed, “We should keep the option to build more nuclear energy plants in the future”—up 14 percentage points from 60 percent in October 1999.

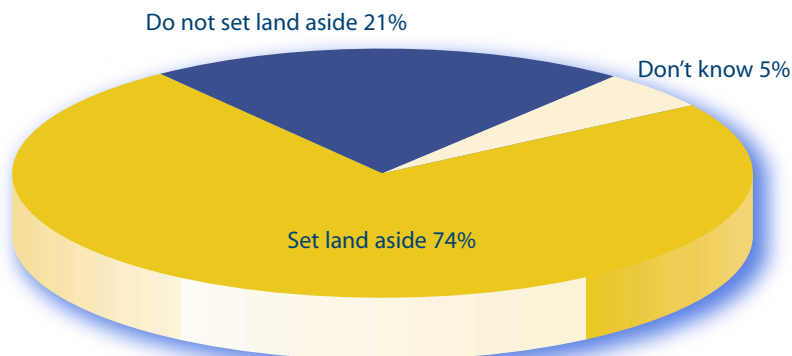
Nearly three-quarters supported the idea that, as part of planning for the future, an electric company should set land aside for future power plants before there is a clear need to build them.

Respondents to the July survey explained why it made sense to them to set land aside for possible future power plants. Their main reasons were that it is good to plan ahead and be prepared in case of a growing need for electricity (23 percent), that we will need more power plants in the future (18 percent), that it is better to buy land while it is available (9 percent), that it will save time (5 percent), that appropriate sites will be chosen (4 percent), and that it lets people know what is going on (3 percent).

Reasons for disapproving a decision to set land aside were opposition to nuclear energy (5 percent) and the belief that more nuclear power plants are not needed (2 percent).

Opinion on Setting Land Aside for Future Power Plants

4 *Question:* “As part of planning for the future, should an electric company set land aside for possible future power plants before there is a clear need to build plants?”



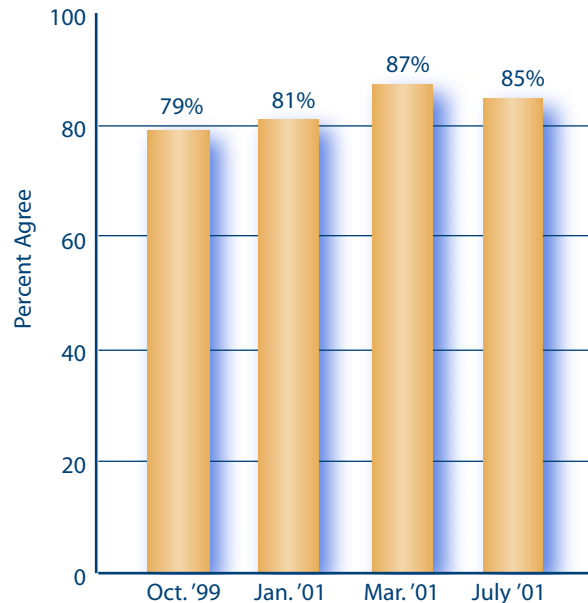
Consensus Support for Nuclear Power Plant License Renewal

Most U.S. adults continue to approve of license renewal for nuclear energy plants that continue to meet federal safety standards. Energy shortages have had little effect on attitudes about license renewal, as public support for keeping nuclear plants has remained high. Electric companies may apply to

Percent Agreeing We Should Renew Licenses of Nuclear Power Plants

4 *Question:* “Please tell me if you personally strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: When their original operating license expires, we should renew the license of nuclear energy plants that continue to meet federal safety standards.”

the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for license extensions to operate nuclear power plants for an additional 20 years, or 60 years total. Six reactors have received NRC license extensions since 1999.



Perceptions of Electricity Needs Shape Opinions on Nuclear Energy

Over time, Bisconti Research has tracked public opinion about various nuclear energy issues—keeping existing plants, renewing the licenses of plants that meet federal safety standards, keeping the option to build more plants, building plants now, and definitely building more plants in the future. The opinions of the American public about nuclear energy are strongly influenced by the perceived need for more electricity.

In times characterized by energy abundance, the public consistently supported wise use of existing resources. For example, large majorities always supported license renewal for nuclear power plants.

But the public supports building new nuclear power plants only when convinced of the need for more electricity production, and that conviction has varied widely over time. Support for building new nuclear power plants dropped two decades ago, when the 1970s energy crisis abated, but has bounced back amid the threat of energy shortages.

Polls today indicate that many Americans are still not convinced they face near-term electricity supply problems, but they want to ensure that they are not faced with problems in the future. Thus, there is greater support for building new

nuclear power plants in the future than for building them right now—although support has increased on both measures.

For example, ABC News polls show a sharp increase in support for building new nuclear power plants *at this time*, from 22 percent in 1990 to 42 percent in June 2001.

That 42 percent support for building nuclear plants *now* compares to 63 percent in the Bisconti/Bruskin survey who believe the United States should definitely build more nuclear power plants *in the future* and 64 percent who would find it acceptable to add a nuclear power plant next to the nearest nuclear power plants that are already operating, *if a new power plant were needed to supply electricity*.

When the timeframe is not identified in the question—and the question is posed in a neutral manner—about half the public supports building new nuclear power plants. For example, a CBS/*New York Times* poll in June asked, “Would you approve or disapprove of building more nuclear power plants to generate electricity?” The result: 51 percent approved, 42 percent disapproved, and the rest were unsure. Those who approve is up 10 percentage points from 1991.

For more information on public opinion about nuclear energy issues, please visit www.nei.org