COP-26 and its aftermath have seen a dramatic rise in nuclear power being marketed as a “solution” needed to fight climate disruption. A “devils in the details” analysis of these claims and a candid review of the history of nuclear power reveal them to be false – little more than marketing hype, aimed at syphoning funds and resources better spent on truly effective and sustainable climate fighting resources like renewables, energy efficiency, energy storage and improved transmission.

Nuclear executives, trade associations, government representatives, even U.S. Senators now regurgitate demonstrably false mantras like nuclear is “clean,” “zero-carbon,” “emissions-free” and "a key tool in our arsenal" to fight climate disruption.

Always and only hyping the slim “positives” associated with nuclear (it’s “low-er carbon”), never the liabilities, the rationale of these nuclear promoters resembles the thinking of an adolescent purchasing his/her first car: if it’s fast, red and a convertible, that’s the one! What about insurance? Oh, I won’t have any accidents! Maintenance costs? Aw, nothing will break down! Price? Oh, the folks will bail me out if I need more cash.

Accidents? What about Chernobyl, Fukushima, Windscale, Three Mile Island or Santa Susanna. Wikipedia lists 29 nuclear power accidents worldwide that exceed $100 million in property damage, 13 in the U.S. Maintenance? Nuclear plant O&M costs increase with age, just like any machine, and are partially responsible for nuclear’s current uncompetitiveness. Costs? The last two U.S. reactors under construction – Vogtle 3&4 in Georgia – are 6 years behind schedule and $14 billion over budget. Illinois ratepayers are now paying profitable Exelon Corporation over $3 billion to bail out reactors here, with Congress poised to gift as much as $44 billion to the nuclear industry.

Real adults understand that you must evaluate both sides of the ledger before committing huge, finite and irreplaceable resources towards a solution. With climate disruption, we must remove the most carbon from the atmosphere, at the lowest cost, in the quickest time, without creating other equally planet-endangering problems. Nuclear power does none of these as well or at all compared to renewable energy and energy efficiency.

Lest one think these are merely the claims of the uninformed, note that two former Chairpersons of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission -- physicist Dr. Gregory Jaczko and Dr. Allison Macfarlane, a geologist -- have publicly stated that nuclear power cannot be viewed as a climate solution. To paraphrase the late S. David Freeman, former public utilities chair of the TVA and the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, trading more plutonium for less carbon is simply dumb energy policy – and we would add, unnecessary.

The independently produced 2021 World Nuclear Industry Status Report lists the many vulnerabilities of nuclear plants in an increasingly climate disrupted world: “The quantitative aspects of such disruptions in
terms of the frequency of unplanned outages of nuclear power plants due to climatic events and the subsequent generation losses have been shown to be consistently increasing over the years."

During COP-26, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg and Portugal banded together to urge the European Commission to keep nuclear out of the EU’s green finance taxonomy, stating, “Nuclear power is incompatible with the EU Taxonomy Regulation’s ‘do no significant harm’ principle.”

Former Japanese Prime Minister during the Fukushima disaster Nato Kan states, “As Prime Minister of Japan at the time of the disaster, I now believe that the time has come for Japan and the world to end its reliance on nuclear power.”

It is equally important to examine the financial and ethical aspects of nuclear, especially since the Biden Administration’s Build Back Better Act is poised to lavish as much as $35 billion on the nuclear industry to bail out uneconomic reactors. It is critical to examine who this money is going to benefit. Current events indicate it will be the corrupt and the already rich entrepreneurs.

Lavishing $35 billion on an industry that has publicly demonstrated its penchant for corruption must be viewed as condoning and rewarding this corrupt behavior. Exelon subsidiary ComEd’s 2019 guilty plea and $200 million fine for illegal lobbying activities; First Energy of Ohio’s ongoing bribery scandal and FBI indictment of state legislators; South Carolina’s SCANA corruption conviction regarding its $9 billion failed reactor build – all are illustrative of the character and operational ethics of the industry that BBB proposes to reward. Congress should be judged by the company it keeps (and rewards) in next year’s mid-term elections.

Much money is proposed to go into R&D for “new” reactor concepts, such as Bill Gate’s TerraPower Natrium reactor proposal, slated for construction in Wyoming. Is it really comforting to hear claims of “safe, meltdown-proof” reactors from the man who gave the World the VISTA Operating System?

Better choices for real climate solutions do exist. For example, $35 billion could buy ~27,000 modern, new 2-megawatt wind turbines. These would generate the electrical equivalent of ~22 nuclear reactors (after adjusting for intermittency), and could be online generating carbon and radioactive-waste-free electricity in 2-3 years. No current nuclear plant design can accomplish this at this cost, and in this time frame. No future reactor design will be available in sufficient utility-scale quantities for 15+ years, assuming the designs even work. We need real, shovel-ready climate solutions now, and before 2030. Simply put – nuclear power is NOT a climate solution. It is an impediment that delays the implementation of real climate solutions.

We are in Climate Code RED. You can't build an energy future by bailing out the past. It is critical that the public and policy makers dispute the fake, pie-in-the-sky promises of a corruption-laden, self-serving nuclear power industry, and invest in a truly sustainable energy future to combat climate disruption.

Nuclear Energy Information Service (NEIS), is a 40-year old, safe-energy advocacy, anti-nuclear power watchdog organization based in Chicago, IL, advocating for a carbon-free/nuclear-free energy future, and environmentally responsible solutions to radioactive waste management.
Déjà vu...all over again!

“I’ve got every confidence this time we can make it work, Charlie! Really, REALLY! (with enough bailouts!!)”