

EU nuclear safety sweep accused of soft-peddalling

May 9 2011, by Christian Spillmann



Shown here are nuclear reactors at a US power plant. Europe on Wednesday will draw up stress-test parameters for a safety sweep of its nuclear power reactors like these, promised after Japan's Fukushima No.1 disaster, but already the focus of bitter disputes.

Europe on Wednesday will draw up stress-test parameters for a safety sweep of its nuclear power reactors, promised after Japan's Fukushima No.1 disaster, but already the focus of bitter disputes.

For experts stand accused of turning a blind eye to the risk of terror attacks or aircraft accidents -- and of being in thrall to the powerful industry lobby governing their career prospects.

The European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG) has been entrusted with the job of checking whether ageing power plants can

withstand the sort of natural disaster that triggered the meltdown in Japan.

It was the EU's 27 heads of state and government who opted to hand the design of the tests to their domestic regulators. ENSREG will meet in Brussels on Wednesday to agree on the criteria.

But the meeting comes as anti-nuclear politicians and campaigners object that the industry lobby, backed by the biggest players in France and Britain, have secured an easy ride.

The EU's energy commissioner Gunther Oettinger has also made it clear he will not settle for a watered-down set of tests.

"I will not put my signature to a [stress test](#) which does not live up to my expectations nor to those of the broader public," Oettinger, of Germany, warned in an interview with the German weekly Spiegel.

"I do not agree with the fact that man-made disasters should be tested on a voluntary basis only," he added.

But Oettinger insists he is prepared to lodge new legislative proposals this year in a bid to force a tougher safety regime.

The commissioner drew the ire of the industry after the March quake and tsunami in Japan when he claimed the world was staring at a [nuclear safety](#) "apocalypse."

On Tuesday, he plans to meet with pressure groups and [European Parliament](#) figures seeking backing for that position.

If Oettinger spoke out it was partly because lobby group the Western European Nuclear Regulators Association (WENRA) wants to exclude

plane crashes and deliberate attacks from the test criteria.

Opponents fear they will manage to push through testing criteria that while raising test limits for plants' resistance to earthquakes, floods or severe systems failures breakdowns, exclude these kinds of man-made catastrophes.

WENRA members Italy and Sweden, which have abandoned nuclear energy, and Germany, which is going to, are among those backing their western partners on the issue.

But France and Britain, which between them account for more than half the 143 nuclear power plants in service in the European Union, are thought to be leading the charge.

Paris and London "are refusing the idea of including a deliberate plane crash, because no European plant would be able to stand up to that and therefore they would all have to close," said European Greens energy expert Michel Raquet.

The French authorities have dismissed the criticism: one of their officials in Brussels insisted that every eventuality would be covered in the stress tests, including the failure of the cooling system which proved so catastrophic at Fukushima.

Other EU countries however, share the fears of anti-nuclear campaigners.

In anti-nuclear Austria, Environment minister Nikolaus Berlakovich has openly criticised European plants' exposure to cyber-attacks.

And Belgium's energy minister Paul Marnette sparked weekend headlines when he argued in a debate with trade unionists that plants

there could be mothballed ahead of schedule.

Lithuania, meanwhile, is anxiously looking over its shoulder at non-EU neighbour Belarus as the latter builds a new plant. The Baltic state wants its EU partners to develop national evacuation strategies in the event of a worst-case scenario, Brussels officials say.

"Based on the current plans for these tests, the European Union is falling well short of the necessary rigour," Greens EU lawmaker Yannick Jadot warned.

"If this is a success for the authorities in London and France, who have pulled this off through intensive lobbying to strip down the tests' specifications, it's a failure for all our citizens," he warned.

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