

EU nuclear safety testing row in meltdown

May 12 2011, by Roddy Thomson



EU energy commissioner Guenther Oettinger gives a press conference in 2010. Fractious talks on testing the safety of European nuclear reactors broke down Thursday as calls to include terror attacks and other man-made disasters in the tests faced resistance from powerful nuclear lobbies in London and Paris.

Fractious talks on testing the safety of European nuclear reactors broke down Thursday as calls to include terror attacks and other man-made disasters in the tests faced resistance from powerful nuclear lobbies in London and Paris.

"No final decision has been taken," the European Commission said after some six hours of talks in Brussels broke up with fresh discussions among the European Nuclear Safety Regulators Group (ENSREG) set for next week, May 19 and 20, in Prague.

"The public expects credible stress tests covering a wide range of risks and safety issues," said EU Energy Commissioner Guenther Oettinger.

"This is what we are working on."

Oettinger wanted stringent and exhaustive checks to take into account human factors, [cyber attacks](#) and plane crashes.

The German commissioner had told the [European Parliament](#) on Tuesday that he would refuse to sign off on "softer stress tests".

But diplomats and officials said the all-powerful nuclear lobby in France and Britain was resisting pressure to design far-reaching simulations that may be difficult to implement, with results hard to sell.

Paris and London between them control more than half the 143 [nuclear power plants](#) in service in the EU, where 14 of the 27 nuclear states have nuclear generators.

Greenpeace EU nuclear policy adviser Jan Haverkamp insisted: "What national nuclear regulators appear to want from stress tests is a largely toothless paper-shuffling exercise".

Tests, the group said, should be carried out "independently and transparently, be mandatory, comprehensive and lead to the rapid closure of those plants that fail".

The EU's 27 heads of state and government entrusted ENSREG in late-March with the job of checking whether ageing power plants can withstand the sort of natural disaster that triggered the Japan meltdown, but set no deadline for testing implementation.

That came after Germany's Oettinger had fallen foul of the nuclear energy industry when he warned of a potential "apocalypse" after a reactor in the Fukushima plant began leaking dangerous levels of radiation following the March quake and tsunami.

European Greens energy expert Michel Raquet has claimed that "no European plant would be able to stand up to that and therefore they would all have to close".

When asked to comment on the chances of a compromise right at the outset of Thursday's talks, France's national nuclear regulatory head Andre-Claude Lacoste said simply: "Not at all, not today."

Britain too is determined to avoid meaningful external control of a strategically important and hugely sensitive issue, especially at a time of deep austerity cuts.

A Brussels diplomat said that plane crashes and other such scenarios "are already borne in mind when reactors are built", citing analysis of geographical location, flying patterns and experience from abroad.

Ahead of a first report on safety for the London government due on Monday, the diplomat said Britain would not allow EU authorities to manage future testing, for "national security" reasons.

The British government also faces a new problem in this area, after the separatist, anti-nuclear Scottish National Party wrested majority control in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh last week.

The Scottish government has the power to prevent new nuclear plants being built to replace decommissioned sites north of the border with England.

The London administration, for whom nuclear is central to its energy policy, must already look to build costly new plants elsewhere in British territory.

While a significant rump of EU states such as Austria are also non-

nuclear, at the strategic level nuclear energy is also "vital in increasing energy security and reducing carbon dioxide emissions", states the programme for incoming EU chair Poland's six-month presidency.

Italy and Sweden, which have already abandoned nuclear energy, and Germany, which is going to, are among western European states backing Paris and London on the issue.

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