

# South Korean town to put nuclear plan to vote

October 8 2014, by Youkyung Lee



In this Tuesday, Oct. 7, 2014 photo, a truck painted with notice of the Oct. 9 referendum is parked in Samcheok, 195 kilometers (120 miles) east of Seoul, South Korea. Fighting plans to build a nuclear power plant, a South Korean fishing village is holding a referendum Thursday, Oct. 9, 2014, even though the government has warned the vote is illegal. A site in Samcheok was picked by the energy ministry after a previous city government applied in 2010 for a nuclear power facility. But attitudes have shifted since Japan's 2011 nuclear disaster at the Fukushima. The Korean characters on the truck read: "Let's keep Samcheok and Oct. 9 referendum." (AP Photo/Yonhap, Bae Yeon-ho)

Fighting plans to build a nuclear power plant, a South Korean fishing village is holding a referendum Thursday, even though the government has warned the vote is illegal.

A site in Samcheok, 195 kilometers (120 miles) east of Seoul, was picked by the energy ministry after a previous city government applied in 2010 for a nuclear power facility. But attitudes have shifted since Japan's 2011 nuclear disaster at the Fukushima.

Now, the city council has set up a volunteer committee to conduct a vote on whether Samcheok still wants the plant after election authorities refused to administer the referendum. Supporters of the nuclear plant say they will boycott.

South Koreans' pride in the country's nuclear power industry has eroded since scandals erupted last year over revelations hundreds of faulty components may have been used in reactors. That forced nearly half the country's 23 reactors to shut down.

Critics of nuclear reactors also became more vocal about safety after an April ferry sinking killed hundreds of people and fueled complaints the country emphasized profit over safety.

In Samcheok, about 39,000 out of 61,000 registered local voters signed up to take part, and about 70 percent were expected to vote, according to Chung Yeon-man, a committee member.

Nuclear energy supplied a quarter of South Korea's power last year, and the government wants to boost that to 29 percent by 2035. That would require adding 7 gigawatts of generating capacity, or the equivalent of five 1.4-gigawatt reactors.

The country also is starting to export nuclear technology. It won a \$20

billion contract from the United Arab Emirates in 2009.

Most of South Korea's reactors are on the southeast coast. Samcheok is one of two cities designated as the next venue for nuclear plants and would be the first in Gangwon province.

Opponents in Samcheok, who say they worry about the impact on fishing, farming and tourism, gained a leg up in the latest mayoral election in June.

Kim Yang-ho, an independent who pledged to scrap nuclear plans, defeated the former mayor, 62 percent to 37 percent.

Since taking office, Kim has taken steps to withdraw the city's application. He says he wants to develop an alternative energy industry instead.

The national government appears unwilling to accept the referendum. The energy ministry told parliament last week it is open to talking to Samcheok but the vote will have no legal effect. A vice minister at the Ministry of Security and Public Administration said in the same hearing that trying to scrap the government's policy through a referendum is illegal.

Opponents of the Samcheok's nuclear plant say the former mayor's administration manipulated a public opinion survey before filing its application and no records of the survey have been found.

"Even though it is a government policy, residents' opinion is important," said Ahn Ho-sung, a 58-year-old former public servant who campaigned against nuclear power plants.

The original plan reflected "no opinion from the residents," said Ahn. "It

is completely invalid."

Supporters say Samcheok needs to create more jobs.

The city was one of South Korea's largest mining communities, with more than 300,000 people, before a decline began in the 1980s. More than one-quarter of its 74,000 people are 65 or older.

"No company in Gangwon province can hire as many people as a nuclear power plant," said Lee Yeon-woo, 65, a retired public servant who leads a civic group with 300 Samcheok residents.

"I was born and grew up here and I witnessed how Samcheok went downhill," said Lee. "If we don't find another industry, half of it population will be gone."

Lee plans to skip Thursday's vote. He plans to file a complaint in court seeking to invalidate the poll.

"I have four children and we all live in Samcheok," Lee said. "If nuclear energy were really dangerous, I would not do this."

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Citation: South Korean town to put nuclear plan to vote (2014, October 8) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-south-korean-town-nuclear-vote.html>

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