

Japanese Nuclear Reactor Ordered Shut Down

The power of ignorance is awesome ... especially in the courts

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A court Friday ordered the shutdown of Japan's second-largest nuclear reactor in response to a lawsuit by residents who feared it could leak dangerous radiation during a powerful earthquake, an official said.

The Kanazawa District Court in northwestern Japan ordered the shutdown of the newly operating No. 2 Shika reactor, court official Akihiko Yasuno said.

Judge Kenichi Ido ruled that the reactor, operated by Hokuriku Electric Power Co., could expose residents to radioactivity should a powerful earthquake occur, Yasuno said. He gave no other details.

The reactor began commercial operations last week after getting approval from the government's nuclear safety agency. The company said it would immediately appeal.

The plaintiffs said they were gratified by the decision, which reflects persistent concerns about nuclear power safety in Japan. The industry has been beset for years with accidents, cover-ups and public opposition.

"I think today's ruling will bring to light whether power reactors used in Japan can withstand earthquakes, and if the government's quake safety guidelines are good enough," plaintiff Tetsuya Tanaka told reporters.

Kanazawa is about 180 miles northwest of Tokyo.

The 135 plaintiffs filed the lawsuit in May 2005 claiming they would be in constant danger because the reactor is near a faultline that a government committee has said a quake with a magnitude of 7.6 could strike, Kyodo News agency reported.

The plaintiffs said that the No. 2 reactor was built based on outdated earthquake guidelines drawn up 20 years ago, according to Kyodo.

The power company has said it took all necessary measures to ensure the plant's safety, and that the reactor is needed to guarantee a steady supply of electricity, Kyodo said.

The report said the government's nuclear safety commission found the reactor met standards for quake resistance, but that the commission is reviewing quake resistance guidelines for nuclear power reactors built to withstand a 6.5-magnitude quake.

Resource-poor Japan is heavily dependent on its nuclear program, with the country's 55 nuclear reactors supplying about a third of its electricity, according to the Natural Resources and Energy Agency.

The government has said it wants to build 11 new plants and raise electricity output from nuclear power to nearly 40 percent of the national supply by 2010. But the public has been increasingly wary of reactor safety.

In 2004, five workers were killed when a corroded pipe at a reactor in western Japan ruptured and sprayed them with boiling water and steam in the country's worst nuclear plant accident. No radiation escaped from that reactor, which has since resumed operations.

Earlier this week, fire broke out at a nuclear plant's waste incinerator in western Japan, but officials said no radiation leaked. Two workers were injured.