

Japanese nuclear plant starts tests

Really great news ... I just hope that there QA is thorough.

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Japan's first plant to extract plutonium and uranium from spent nuclear fuel started test runs in hopes of providing much-needed energy despite protests from residents and environmentalists.

The 17-month test is expected to lead to full-fledged production next year in the northern village of Rokkasho, providing a new form of energy to one of the world's biggest oil importers.

"Everything went smoothly without any obstruction," said Kazuhiko Shimada, a spokesman for the plant's operator, Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd.

The company raced Friday to sign last-minute agreements with surrounding communities pledging safety before beginning the long-delayed tests.

The plant will eventually produce uranium-plutonium mixed oxide (MOX) fuel, which would boost the electricity generated by existing reactors through recycling. More than 30 MOX reactors now operate in Europe.

Concerned residents and environmentalists of the only country attacked with atomic bombs have held periodic protests against the plant, which theoretically could also process weapons-grade plutonium to produce energy.

About 100 protestors gathered at the front gate Friday to protest the launch of the tests at the Rokkasho plant which lies on the northern tip of Japan's main island of Honshu.

"I really feel frustrated and sad," said Keiko Kikukawa, 57, a local farmer who has protested the project for years.

"I've worked for such a long time to stop this test run, which is not necessary at all," she told AFP by telephone.

Protesters have pointed out that even though the plant would create the new type of fuel, Japan does not yet have any reactors that can operate on it.

The city of Genkai in southern Japan on Sunday accepted a plan by regional power utility Kyushu Electric Power Co. to begin using MOX fuel at one of its reactors.

But the Genkai reactor would not be able to process MOX fuel until the business year to March 2011 at the earliest and lies more than 1,200 kilometers (750 miles) from Rokkasho, in Aomori prefecture, raising further concerns about safety.

The Japanese electric industry has planned to use the plutonium and uranium extraction method since 1997 and had set a plan to operate 16 to 18 nuclear reactors by the year to March 2011. But the goal has been stalled by a series of accidents and scandals.

Construction of the Rokkasho facility began in 1993 but the start of operations was delayed by problems including a design flaw.

"I believe this reprocessing plant will contribute a lot to the nation's energy policies," Aomori governor Shingo Mimura said Tuesday.

Japan counts on nuclear energy for 30 percent of its electricity but is almost entirely dependent on imports for its oil.

The **professional activist** **francised** Greenpeace organization complained about the waste that would be generated by the plant and the potential military link. "Reprocessing is a daily nuclear accident due to the massive discharges of nuclear waste authorized by government agencies, which have no regard for public health or the wider environment," the group's **paid spokesman** Shaun Burnie said.