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Quiet no more, French village becomes center of anti-nuclear protest

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BURE, France (Reuters) - The 82 residents of the French village of Bure lived a quiet life until the government began testing the feasibility of storing nuclear waste there. Now Bure is rocked by protests as a final decision on the project looms.

A nuclear warning symbol and the word "irradiated" are painted on road signs in the village of Bure, France, April 6, 2018. Picture taken April 6, 2018. REUTERS/Vincent Kessler

For the past 20 years, French nuclear waste agency Andra has tested the stability of the clay of the northeastern village to see if it could hold radioactive waste for hundreds of thousands of years.

Andra is preparing a formal request for next year to build the 25 billion euro (\$31 billion) facility to hold waste from the reactors of state-owned utility EDF.

French nuclear regulator ASN has already said the plan is sound and deep geological storage is the safest way to protect future generations from radioactive waste.

But a police van at the main square is testimony to rising tensions and demonstrations that have at times blocked the area where Andra wants to dig.

"Life will become unbearable here with the nuclear waste and all the demonstrators," said Bure mayor Gerard Antoine, who breeds beef cattle.

Antoine approved the installation of Andra research facilities two decades ago but said he now regrets that decision and would say no if he were asked today.

Hundreds of demonstrators who built a camp nearby were kicked out by police in February but say they are there for the long run and will fight the project until the government changes its plans.

"We are heading straight for ... a nuclear disaster, that's why we're against it," said Jean-Marc Fleury,

a local elected official with an environmentalist party.

Police are maintaining a heavy presence while protestors have regrouped in and around a house in the Bure village center.

The future Cigeo site is designed to cover an area of 600 hectares and have 250 kilometers of underground galleries where nuclear waste would be buried in huge rust-proof cylinders.

DEEP BURIAL

Andra, which carried out research work via a research laboratory 500 meters underground, wants to start work on the site in 2022 and complete it by 2030.

“We’re not going to do deep burial of (nuclear) waste if we had any doubt that it would leak or contaminate the environment,” said Andra spokesman Mathieu Saint Louis.

Slideshow (8 Images)

“The ultimate goal with an underground installation such as this one is precisely to protect ourselves from the danger of (nuclear) waste.”

For now, spent fuel from French nuclear reactors is stored in pools next to the reactors before it is shipped to state-owned nuclear fuel group Orano’s recycling plant in La Hague, western France.

But La Hague is not designed for long-term storage and France does not have a solution 40 years after investing heavily in nuclear energy. Other countries that use nuclear power face the same problem.

The Bure site is designed so that nuclear waste could be retrieved for the first 100 years if scientists find a better solution than burying it. Otherwise, the underground galleries will be permanently sealed with concrete.

Anti-nuclear activists say deep geological storage does not offer perfect guarantees against radiation leakage in ground water. They want the waste moved to underground facilities that are just a few meters deep, to monitor it better.

(\$1 = 0.8088 euros)

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