

Valley nuclear plant future clouded by events in Japan

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The juxtaposition was striking. While the Madera County Board of Supervisors endorsed a proposed nuclear power plant in the Central Valley, the "Fukushima 50" put their lives on the line in an attempt to contain Japan's nuclear crisis.

What do you suppose will have the bigger impact on whether Fresno Nuclear Group dreams materialize -- the unanimous opinion of local supervisors or the televised sight of heroes in radiation suits trying to prevent reactor meltdown?

Events in Japan are now part of the nuclear debate, joining Chernobyl and Three Mile Island. Japan is the reason that liquid iodine is flying off the shelf as Californians -- however irrationally -- seek protection from radiation 5,000 miles away.

The reality is that Valley residents are bit players in deciding whether a nuclear plant is built in our backyard. The Fresno Nuclear Group wants local support, sure. But our opinions will only matter after investors, judges and federal and state officials weigh in.

Right now, investors are skittish. For example, market analysts predicted this week that a planned \$10 billion expansion of a Texas plant won't get off the drawing board.

In addition, the death of President Obama's federal cap-and-trade proposal to combat global warming has made the economics of nuclear power less attractive -- even as Obama tries to spur plant construction with federal loans.

Courts always are in play on big projects. But Fresno Nuclear's proposal is guaranteed to involve a legal scrap. The group says its reactors would be part of a water-treatment plant and, therefore, not subject to California's ban on new nuclear construction. This is a long-shot gambit.

We certainly can use the benefits that would flow from Fresno Nuclear's planned 5,000-acre energy park: permanent jobs, clean power and desalinating an ocean of water trapped deep below the Valley's crust.

The pro-nuclear crowd, too, can point to nuclear's impressive overall safety record and the fact that California's two commercial nuclear plants -- Diablo Canyon and San Onofre -- provide 15% of the state's electricity.

As Fresno Nuclear Group CEO John Hutson has said many times, today's nuclear technology is safer and has more backup systems than what went into 1970s-era plants. And even nuclear critics admit that the containment structures are the strongest things ever built.

Still, there's the lingering question: Why risk catastrophe when less potentially lethal sources of power are available?

Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, weighed in Wednesday with a news release that accused the media of "apocalyptic" reporting on what's transpiring in Japan. Nunes is co-author of legislation that would mandate approval of 200 nuclear reactors in the United States by 2040.

"Americans are rightly concerned and deserve a factual reporting of the crisis," Nunes said. "Unfortunately, we are instead being bombarded by sensational headlines and commentary that stretches the bounds of scientific reality to the point of utter fiction."

In blaming the messenger, Nunes either overlooked -- or chose to ignore -- the comments of America's atomic energy chief who expressed grave concern about the crisis.

Meanwhile, federal regulators are reviewing applications for 20 new plants. Fresno Nuclear's proposal has yet to enter the pipeline. Meaning: there's no telling how the market -- or the politics -- will judge the plan when time comes for the ultimate up or down.