

Neighbours uneasy about restarting Chalk River reactor

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An Ontario nuclear facility could begin producing medical isotopes as early as Thursday after the federal government ordered the plant to reopen, but some people who live nearby worry about that decision.

The federal government bypassed the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission's order for the Chalk River reactor to close due to a host of safety concerns. Late Wednesday, the Senate ensured swift passage of a bill rushed through the House of Commons.

The emergency bill allows Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd., the Crown corporation that owns the facility, to restart the reactor for 120 days.

The facility produces more than half the world's medical isotopes. It was shut down on Nov. 18, resulting in worldwide shortages of nuclear material used to perform scans and imaging tests that diagnose cancers and heart conditions and examine fractures.

The government's decision to have the plant resume operations has some in nearby communities worried.

"If the regulatory board shut it down, then there's a good reason for that," said Darlene Hart, who has lived in Chalk River her entire life.

She said Ottawa's rush to get the reactor started without proper discussion of safety or alternatives has her wondering whether now is a good time to get out of the area and take a vacation.

But the government argues the risk of a reactor meltdown is minimal, while the critical need for medical isotopes is growing every day.

The nuclear safety regulator shut down the plant over concerns that its emergency power system was not connected to the cooling pumps, as required to prevent overheating during a disaster such as an earthquake or fire.

Kelly O'Grady, who is part of a local group that keeps an eye on plant's environmental impact, said safety should trump everything when dealing with nuclear facilities and is bothered by the precedent the government is setting.

"They are taking the regulatory authority away from the CNSC and that scares me," she said.

But not everyone in the small community of 500 people shares her concerns.

Tom Tennant, who has worked at the nuclear plant for 17 years, said he feels the government wouldn't restart the reactor if it wasn't safe.

"There shouldn't be any worry with regard to safety in this area. The reactor has been around for 50 years and we are quite happy with it — at least I am anyway," he said.

In nearby Pembroke, where nearly 800 Chalk River employees live, Mayor Ed Jacyno says public safety needs to be balanced with and health concerns.

"The Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission really has a mandate to ensure public safety and think they really have been quite diligent in that process, but I think these were really quite exceptional circumstances," he said.

While his citizens obviously don't want to work in a dangerous environment, many of them also have relatives who need the medical treatments provided by Chalk River's isotopes.