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Wishing Upon an Atom in a Tiny French Village

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FESSENHEIM, France — The protesters who periodically descend upon this rural village say the aging nuclear power station here, in the woods beyond the cornfields, is a calamity in waiting. They note that its twin reactors, the country's oldest, were built 30 feet below the dike of the canal that runs alongside the Rhine River — the water serves as the station's coolant — but that France's national utility, which runs the plant, has declined to study the consequences of a break in the embankment. The plant also sits in a seismic zone — in 1356, an earthquake decimated the Swiss city of Basel, just 30 miles south — and atop one of Europe's largest aquifers. The concrete containment vessels that surround the reactors at Fessenheim are just a fraction of the thickness of those at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan, at least one of which was shown to have cracked in the disaster there.

The front-runner in this year's presidential race, the Socialist François Hollande, has pledged to close the plant if he is elected in May. Even in the wake of the meltdown in Japan, as France's European neighbors have begun to close nuclear plants, this village quite likes its power station. Just a mile or so from the border with Germany — which closed its eight oldest reactors within days of the Fukushima disaster — Fessenheim seems a fitting symbol of France's attachment to the atom. The village's 2,341 inhabitants pay little heed to the warnings of catastrophe from antinuclear types. They are far more interested, they say, in the doctors and nurses who have chosen to work here, the bike lanes and freshly paved roads, the pharmacy, the supermarket, the public pool, media center and athletic complex, as well as the day care center, the nursery school, the elementary and middle schools — all of them subsidized by the millions of euros in taxes that flow from the plant each year.

France's 58 nuclear reactors produce nearly 75 percent of the country's electricity — the largest proportion for any nation in the world — with a total installed capacity second only to that of the United States. The nuclear industry accounts for an estimated 400,000 jobs, and France sells and builds nuclear plants abroad. The country is the world's largest net exporter of electricity. Just over the Rhine, Germany's remaining nine reactors are scheduled for closing by 2022. Switzerland's government banned the construction of new nuclear plants last May. Spain has had a similar ban in place for years, while in Italy, where the last nuclear plant ceased operation in 1990, voters last year repealed a government plan for new sites.

France, meanwhile, has shut not a single reactor in the wake of the disaster in Japan, and it is building a next-generation plant on the northern coast. In a report released this week, the government auditing agency advised that the country's reliance on nuclear energy is such that France has little choice but to continue operating all its nuclear stations for at least the coming decade.

President Nicolas Sarkozy has pledged to protect the industry from his presidential opponents. "Our nuclear industry constitutes a force — an economic force, a considerable strategic source for France," he said in November. "To destroy it would have consequences that would be — I dare to use the word — dramatic."