

Nicolas Sarkozy makes €1bn commitment to nuclear power

French president says post-Fukushima abandonment of nuclear 'makes no sense' as he announces push for new technology

Kim Willsher in Paris
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Nicolas Sarkozy announces the investment in nuclear power. Photograph: Fred Dufour/AFP/Getty Images

The French president, [Nicolas Sarkozy](#), has bucked the anti-nuclear trend following Japan's Fukushima disaster by pledging €1bn of investment in atomic power.

Despite growing worldwide concern about the safety of nuclear plants, Sarkozy said the moratorium on new nuclear reactors adopted by certain countries since the Japanese nuclear crisis in March "makes no sense".

"There is no alternative to nuclear [energy](#) today," he told journalists on Monday.

"We are going to devote €1bn to the nuclear programme of the future, particularly fourth-generation technology," Sarkozy said.

Sarkozy also promised "substantial resources" to strengthen research into nuclear safety and a further €1.3bn (£1.2bn) investment in renewable energy.

The announcement confirming France's commitment to atomic power came as neighbouring Germany drew up plans to shut all its nuclear stations by 2022.

It also came 24 hours after thousands of anti-nuclear protesters formed a human chain outside France's oldest [nuclear power](#) station to demand its closure.

The plant at Fessenheim in Alsace, on France's border with Germany, has become the focus of a fierce debate over nuclear safety.

At the weekend, demonstrators from France, Germany and Switzerland surrounded the plant calling for its number one reactor, in operation since 1977, to be taken out of service, claiming it was vulnerable to flooding and earthquakes. The plant is operated by French power group EDF.

The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, announced in May that Germany would phase out its 17 nuclear reactors, which provide up to 23% of the country's energy, by 2022 at a cost of €40bn. She said Germany would concentrate on renewable energy sources.

"We want to end the use of nuclear energy and reach the age of renewable energy as fast as possible," Merkel said.

Switzerland has also decided not to replace its five existing nuclear reactors, which supply around 40% of its energy, when they reach the end of their working life. The last of the nuclear stations is expected to end production by 2034, leaving time for Switzerland to develop alternative power sources.

Italy's prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, sought to restart his country's nuclear programme, abandoned in the 1980s. But 94% of Italian voters rejected the idea in a referendum earlier this month.

France has 58 nuclear reactors, which supply 74% of its electricity, and is the world's largest net exporter of electricity from nuclear sources.

Sarkozy said France was known to be "considerably ahead" of other countries in terms of atomic power technology and safety.

"Our power stations are more expensive because they are safer," he said.

Following the Fukushima nuclear accidents, caused by a combination of earthquake and tsunami, the French prime minister, François Fillon, asked the nuclear safety authority to carry out an "open and transparent" audit of the country's nuclear installations, examining the risks of flood and earthquake damage, loss of power and cooling, and emergency accident procedure, to examine if any improvements could be made. Its conclusions are expected in September.

All 143 working nuclear power plants in the EU's 27 member states are facing new safety tests in the wake of the Fukushima disaster.

French ecology minister Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet said no decision on the future of Fessenheim would be made before the nuclear safety watchdog submitted its report.

• This article was amended on 29 June 2011. The original said that the 17 nuclear reactors in Germany provide up to 40% of the country's energy. This has been corrected.