Japan split over restart of first nuclear reactor since Fukushima disaster
Rising costs from gas and oil are sited by supporters of a programme to bring
reactors back on line, but ageing plant and risks raise widespread concern

Emergency tests at the Sendai nuclear plant near Satsumasendai in advance of
of its restart. Photograph: Getty Images

Justin McCurry in Satsumasendai

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An otherwise unremarkable town in south-west Japan will be propelled this week
to the forefront of the country’s biggest experiment with nuclear power since the
Fukushima disaster in March 2011.

After months of debate about safety, Japan will begin producing nuclear energy
for the first time in almost two years close to the town of Satsumasendai as early
as Tuesday.

Restarting one of the Sendai nuclear plant’s two 30-year-old reactors represents
a victory for the prime minister, Shinzo Abe, who insists that without nuclear
energy the Japanese economy will buckle beneath the weight of expensive oil
and gas imports.

But his call for Japan to confront its Fukushima demons has been greeted with
scepticism by most voters, whose opposition to nuclear restarts remains firm,
even in the face of rising electricity bills.

Just over four years since Fukushima Daiichi had a triple meltdown, triggering
the world’s worst nuclear crisis for 25 years, Japan remains deeply divided over
its future energy mix.

The 2011 disaster forced the evacuation of 160,000 people and the closure of all
the country’s 48 working reactors for safety checks.

Opinions among the 100,000 residents of Satsumasendai range from anxiety to
relief.
Yoshiharu Ogawa has been among those to campaign against Japan’s return to nuclear power. Photograph: Justin McCurry/Justin McCurry for the Guardian

Local campaigners say the plant operators – Kyushu Electric – and local authorities have yet to explain how they would quickly evacuate tens of thousands of residents in the event of a Fukushima-style meltdown.

“There are schools and hospitals near the plant, but no one has told us how children and the elderly would be evacuated,” said Yoshitaka Mukohara, a representative of a group opposing the Sendai restart.

“Naturally there will be gridlock caused by the sheer number of vehicles, landslides, and damaged roads and bridges.”

A survey by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper found that only two of 85 medical institutes and 15 of 159 nursing and other care facilities within a 30 km radius of the Sendai plant had proper evacuation plans.

About 220,000 people live within a 30km radius – the size of the Fukushima no-go zone – of the Sendai plant; a 50km radius would draw in Kagoshima city and raise the number of affected people to 900,000. “I can’t begin to imagine how chaotic that would be,” Mukohara said.

Massive earthquakes of the kind that sparked the Fukushima meltdown are not the only potential hazard. The Sendai facility is surrounded by a group of five calderas, and Sakurajima, one of Japan’s most active volcanoes, is just 50km away, leaving the plant exposed to volcanic ash fallout, and, in the most extreme scenario, lava flows.
Fukushima reactor meltdown was a man-made disaster, says official report

There are doubts, too, about the reliability of an ageing reactor that has not been used since it was shut down for safety checks in 2011. “You wouldn’t have much faith in a car that’s been on the road for more than 30 years,” said Mukohara. “So why are we so willing to trust a nuclear reactor?”

Shaun Burnie, a nuclear specialist at Greenpeace Germany, accused Japan’s government and nuclear industry of cutting corners in its desperation to put reactors back online.

“They are disregarding fundamental principles of nuclear safety and public health protection,” Burnie said. “The same players in the ‘nuclear village’ that delivered Japan the Fukushima Daiichi tragedy in 2011 are attempting to kick-start nuclear power again.”

Sendai nuclear power plant in Kagoshima prefecture, south-west Japan. Photograph: Justin McCurry/Justin McCurry for the Guardian

Sendai reactor No 1 is one of 25 reactors being targeted for possible restarts. “We’ve finally come this far to restart the first reactor,” the trade and industry minister, Yoichi Miyazawa, told reporters recently. The plant’s second reactor is expected to go back into operation in October.
Last autumn, the Sendai reactors became the first to clear safety hurdles imposed by a revamped nuclear regulation authority. The restart was approved by 19 of the 26 assembly members in Satsumasendai, located 1,000km south-west of Tokyo, and by the pro-nuclear governor of Kagoshima prefecture, Yuichiro Ito.

With national polls showing that most Japanese oppose nuclear restarts, the town’s council is reluctant to gauge local opinion, said Ryoko Torihara, a Satsumasendai resident who is campaigning to keep the reactors idle.

“They won’t conduct a poll of local people because they’re scared of the result,” she said. “They’re aware that Japan has fared perfectly well without nuclear power for almost two years.”

A nationwide Kyodo News poll last October found that 60% of respondents opposed an immediate return to nuclear energy, while 31% were in favour. But supporters of the restarts say the long hiatus in nuclear energy production has taken its toll on Satsumasendai’s population.

When in operation, the plant contributes up to 3bn yen (£16m) a year to the local economy, according to the local chamber of industry and commerce, much of it via 3,000 workers who descend on the town twice a year to conduct lengthy safety checks.

Satsumasendai continues to receive more than 1bn yen in annual government subsidies for hosting the reactors, but some residents complain keeping the plant shuttered for so long has sucked the life out of local commerce, with hotels, restaurants and other service industries reporting a dramatic drop in trade.

“This is my hometown and I don’t like to see its economy in trouble,” said Tetsuro Setoguchi, a 27-year-old builder. “We receive lots of subsidies for hosting the nuclear plant, and if they dry up it will be difficult for the town to function.

“Lots of jobs depend on the plant, especially in the construction industry. I’m sure that every single builder here wants the reactors to be restarted.”

Kyushu Electric, which last August received a 100bn yen bailout from a state-owned bank to survive, estimates that putting one reactor back online would help it reduce costs from burning fossil fuels by about 7.4bn yen a month. The utility is reeling from four straight years of losses, and nuclear operators across Japan say they have incurred tens of billions of dollars in losses as a result of Fukushima-enforced plant closures.

Before Fukushima, nuclear provided 30% of Japan’s energy needs, and there were plans to increase its share to around 50%. Post-Fukushima, the Abe administration has set nuclear an ambitious target of a 20-22% share of the total energy mix by 2030.
Anti-nuclear protestors demonstrate at the Kagoshima prefectural assembly session in 2014 which agreed to resume nuclear power generation at the Sendai plant near Satsumasendai. Photograph: AP

As it prepares to lead Japan into a new, uncertain age of nuclear power generation, the Sendai plant is a fortress protected by high perimeter fences and patrolled by security guards.

At a tent village set up on a windswept beach just along the coast, anti-nuclear activists refuse to accept that Japan’s imminent nuclear reboot is inevitable. “We will do all we can to stop it,” said Yoshiharu Ogawa, who has travelled from his home near Tokyo. “The local authorities may have approved the restart, but they are completely out of touch with public opinion.”