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Mothballed Philippine Nuclear Power Plant – Some Postmortem Perspectives

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Siting of a nuclear waste facility has not been easy, and even after decades of nuclear plant operations a single commercial facility has yet to be opened, although there are a few that are in the advanced stages of development and acceptability. In contrast are some very expensive waste facility projects in some developed countries have been discontinued even after substantial expense due to social acceptability problems.

The Philippine Nuclear Power Plant debacle epitomizes the social costs that a populace can endure due to a negative perception. It never had a waste repository problem because it never operated. Built at the cost of a staggering 2.2 Billion US dollars, the plant is the single biggest debt item of the Philippines, and daily loan payments still run to $170,000. Completed in 1986, it was never operated for a variety of reasons (including corruption by the Marcos government) , the most bandied of which were safety factors: location close to a geological fault and a volcano. The consequences and social cost of the closure were very painful – aside from the financial burden that a poor country can ill-afford, the loss of the power plant resulted in crippling power failures in the 1990's that severely damaged the Philippine economy. Stop-gap means to provide power resulted in the hasty contracting of oil and coal-fired independent power producers, who imposed onerous contracts disadvantageous to the Philippine government. These factors have helped make the power costs in the Philippines one of the highest in Asia. After nearly two painful decades, the question can again be asked, was it worth closing the plant, and were the reasons for closing it really based on scientific grounds, or was it a political decision? Answers to these questions could add perspective to the difficult social acceptability problems that the nuclear industry faces.

We reexamine the scientific basis for the closure of the plant, specifically the occurrence of a fault on the site, and risks due to construction proximate to a volcano. We also examine probable sites for storing high level nuclear waste had the plant been operated.