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Officials continue to defend reactor

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Energy and ecology officials have mounted a campaign to defend the safety of Mexico's first nuclear power plant before it is started up, while critics continue to question its reliability, necessity and economics.

Jose Luis Alcudia, assistant energy secretary, told senators Tuesday there was nothing to hide about the Laguna Verde plant, named for the green Gulf of Mexico lagoon it sits next to.

"The government and Mexican nuclear technicians consider that the reactors can operate with maximum security in terms of international standards," he said.

The plant, 200 miles east of Mexico City in Veracruz state, has been ready to load its radioactive fuel since last December, according to the federal Electricity Commission.

But President Miguel de la Madrid postponed start-up in an apparent attempt to calm protests by ecological groups and to minimize the issue during Veracruz state's municipal elections.

The elections, held Oct. 2, were largely won by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party. Newspapers have since carried a flurry of unconfirmed reports that the loading is imminent.

Officials of the Energy Department, state-owned Federal Electricity Commission and Urban Development and Ecology Department spoke to senators on Tuesday and were to appear in the

Chamber of Deputies, the lower house, Wednesday evening.

Alcudia said the plant is part of a long-range plan to diversify energy sources.

The first of the two 657-megawatt reactors is ready for low level power tests and that there are no technical obstacles to loading fuel, he said.

Sen. Porfirio Munoz Ledo of the leftist National Democratic Front and leaders of the Group of 100, an ecological group of artists and intellectuals, walked out of Tuesday's session, the newspaper La Jornada said.

Munoz Ledo questioned the economics of the plant considering decline in income from oil exports. He also asked whether the country really has an energy deficit, if the plant was safe and whether it could be changed to another type of fuel.

"Why the rush to load the reactor?" he asked numerous times.

Homero Aridjis, a poet who is a spokesman for the Group of 100, said there should be a national referendum on whether to put the plant into operation.

Rafael Fernandez de la Garza, director of the project, said the plant has five backup systems in case of accidents.

"If the plant is not put into operation, we would be exposed to cuts in electrical service by any failure in the current system," he said.

Alcudia said the plant will cover 66 percent of the estimated increase in electrical demand expected in 1989.

Crude oil prices showing increase to \$14 per barrel

AUSTIN (AP) — Crude oil futures prices surged above \$14 a barrel Wednesday for the first time in two weeks amid growing speculation that OPEC may be moving toward an agreement to restrain its production.

Analysts said some late buying was triggered by a rumor, promptly denied at the State Department, that the U.S. embassy in Saudi Arabia had been bombed.

The price for the November contract for West Texas Intermediate oil, the benchmark U.S. crude, climbed 56 cents to settle at \$14.11 a barrel.

In other trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange, the November contract for wholesale unleaded gasoline rose 1.87 cents to settle at 42.66 cents a gallon, while home heating oil rose 1.76 cents to 40.84 cents a gallon.

Reports that several members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries have been producing well in

excess of their quotas drove prices down to last week's lows.

But prices have moved higher since then, as some traders say signs have emerged of a more conciliatory attitude among OPEC members.

"There is a growing perception that prices had gotten low enough to force OPEC to do something," Peter Beutel, assistant director of the energy group at Elders Futures Inc. in New York, said.

Earlier this week, Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter, reaffirmed it would stick to its production quota if other members of OPEC did.

Beutel said the approach of the Oct. 20 meeting of the OPEC price monitoring and long-term strategy committees was making some traders nervous about the risks of agreements they might have previously made to sell borrowed oil contracts in expectations prices would fall further.

Surrogates help spread message for candidates

AUSTIN (AP) — From political officeholders to celebrities, candidates' children to their in-laws, the campaign trail across Texas is heavily traveled this autumn by surrogates stumping for the presidential hopefuls.

Stand-ins show up when candidates can't, spend more time in the state than any candidate could while running nationwide and carry the message to voters and news media in small towns and communities or places the campaigns might otherwise bypass.

"They're going where the presidential ticket has gone and where it has not gone," Reggie Bashur of George Bush's Texas campaign said. "They're going all over the state, into areas that have big media markets and small ones, places that have three network (television) affiliates and places that have one weekly newspaper."

Tom Cosgrove, director of Dukakis' campaign in the state, said, "You use surrogates primarily in smaller markets, where they can dominate the news and help carry your message. And there are certain surrogates who have specialties on one issue or another who can speak to those."

Among the Republicans who have served as Bush stand-ins are his eldest son George W. Bush, Texas Sen. Phil Gramm, Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos, Gov. Bill Clements, former Sen. John Tower and former superstar Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach.

Staubach, Gramm's wife, Wendy, and Columba Bush, the vice president's daughter-in-law, launched a 14-city South Texas campaign tour on Wednesday.

Columba Bush said she hoped her presence would attract Hispanic voters to the GOP ticket.

"I'm one of them," she said at the

first stop, which was Cisco's Restaurant in Austin. "I've had the same feelings, the same background. We share a lot of things."

Across town to visit a senior citizen's center, meanwhile, was Andrea Dukakis, eldest daughter of the Democratic nominee. She also was scheduled to campaign in coastal town of Corpus Christi.

Authorities catch suspect in arson case

JEFFERSON, N.H. (AP) — Authorities said Wednesday a former volunteer firefighter is suspected of setting 16 suspicious blazes that have terrified this town since May, prompting residents to sleep in shifts and form night patrols.

Plainclothes police officers hustled Lance Lalumiere, 23, into the police station in neighboring Lancaster, where he was arraigned on one felony arson charge stemming from a fire at his brother's cabin. Bail was set at \$50,000.

State Safety Commissioner Richard Flynn said the state will seek indictments against Lalumiere, charging him with setting 15 other fires.

Five of the 21 suspicious fires apparently were set by others, said state Police Lt. Gary Sloper, who declined to give details, including how many suspects there are and whether any of the suspects acted in concert.

Jefferson, a quiet hamlet of 850 people, has had 21 suspicious or confirmed arson fires since a May 5 grass fire. A barn was the next target, then empty homes and later occupied ones.

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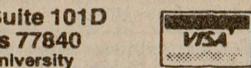
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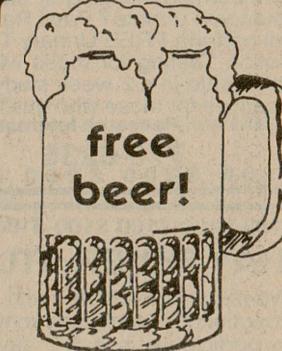
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