

Siangsiliao farmers win land reprieve

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Farming activists and environmentalists celebrated after the Taiwan High Administrative Court yesterday ordered the Central Taiwan Science Park to halt all expansion activities pending a ruling on two ongoing lawsuits.

The science park's two latest expansion projects — one in Taichung County's Houli Township (後里) and the other in Changhua County's Erlin Township (二林) — have sparked controversy in recent years as farmers oppose government expropriation of their farmlands to make way for the science park.

To stop the seizure of their farmlands in Siangsiliao (雙寮), Erlin, activists, environmentalists and local farmers filed three lawsuits with the administrative court — to void the science park's construction permit for the Erlin project, to nullify the results of an environmental impact assessment, and to order the science park to stop all activities related to the expansion project until rulings on the two prior issues are handed down.

The court yesterday ruled in favor of the activists and suspended all expansion activities.

“The court ruling stressed a very important point,” Taiwan Rural Front spokeswoman Tsai Pei-hui (蔡培慧) told a news conference at the legislature. “It said ‘economic development and environmental protection are equally important.’”

“This is a very crucial ruling, and we're now at a very crucial moment: From now on, economic development should no longer take precedence over the environment, as people used to think decades ago,” she said.

The court ruled that since the destruction of farmlands could cause irreversible damage, it was ordering a halt to construction.

Upon hearing the news, several Siangsiliao farmers rushed to Taipei to attend the press conference.

“We may be just illiterate farmers who are not very smart, but we've faithfully followed the whole legal process, and we hope the government will also abide by the court ruling,” farmer Chen Huang Yuan (陳煌遠) said.

Another Siangsiliao resident, Yang Yu-chou (楊裕洲), also urged the government to comply with the ruling and avoid wasting more taxpayers' money on the controversial development project.

Although happy with the ruling, Thomas Chan (陳國治), a member of the Taiwan Rural Front and a lawyer, voiced his worries that the government may try to twist it when interpreting the ruling.

“Of course the ruling is legally binding, and the project should be suspended right away even if the [science park] administration would like to appeal it,” Chan said. “But I'm still not very confident because of what happened to [the Houli project].”

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Last year, the administrative court revoked the environmental impact assessment on the science park's Houli expansion project. However, the Environmental Protection Administration (EPA) insisted that construction should continue, saying that since construction started based on a previously completed and valid environmental impact assessment result, it was not in violation of the Environmental Impact Assessment Act (環境影響評估法), which mandates that such development projects can only begin after completing an environmental impact assessment.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen, but this is still something to celebrate," Chan said.

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