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Abe's advisory council calls for early restart of nuclear reactors

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By TOMOYA FUJITA/ Staff Writer

Private-sector members in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's economic growth council have submitted a proposal calling for the early restart of idled nuclear reactors despite continued public resistance.

The proposal was compiled by an Industrial Competitiveness Council subcommittee and submitted to the council at a meeting on March 29.

The council is currently discussing Abe's growth strategy, and the subcommittee, led by Yasuhiro Sato, president of Mizuho Financial Group Inc., has been tasked with tackling issues in the electric power industry.

The proposal outlines measures that will be described in the government's growth strategy, including the promotion of renewable energy such as wind power, and higher-efficiency of thermal power generation, as well as the separation of electricity transmission from generation.

But the proposal seems to strongly favor industries seeking reactor restarts, despite widespread calls among the public for the government to be cautious due to the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant disaster.

"The government should restart nuclear reactors as early as possible and maintain nuclear power generation as a national policy so that it accounts for a certain ratio of the energy supply in Japan," said committee member Sadayuki Sakakibara, chairman of Toray Industries.

According to the subcommittee, nuclear power plants are needed to fill the role of providing cheap, reliable energy.

However, some of the private-sector members have expressed opposition to the suggestion, emphasizing instead the need to separate electricity transmission business from major electric power companies.

"The government must be cautious in restarting nuclear reactors," said Takeshi Niinami, president of Lawson Inc., after the March 29 meeting.

Heizo Takenaka, a professor of economics at Keio University, added: "The government should take a cautious stance in relation to the restart of nuclear reactors. Rather than the issue of the restart, the government should first resolve the problem of high (operating) cost of electric power companies."

During the subcommittee meeting, Takenaka insisted that the government should first tackle the separation issue. However, his assertion was described only as an "individual opinion" in the outline of proposals.

The proposal noted that such a separation is expected to promote competition and help to make the electricity bills cheaper. But in a section of further consideration for the industry, it also said that the costs of making the separation requires "certain attention and measures."

Hiroshi Mikitani, chairman and president of Rakuten Inc., said, "What is important is to produce competition (among companies) based on market competition."

Abe says he plans to make the separation of electricity generation and transmission a key policy in his growth strategy. But the Industrial Competitiveness Council apparently regards the restart of idled nuclear reactors as the key feature in the growth strategy.

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