

CROOKED CLEANUP (3): Reporters document extent of shoddy decontamination practices

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To discover the extent of shoddy decontamination practices, Asahi Shimbun reporters spent 130 hours observing, photographing and interviewing workers at various locations in Fukushima Prefecture from Dec. 11 to 18.

Early on Dec. 14, one of the reporters visited a forested area in Tamura, about 17 kilometers west of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, and positioned a camera at a site about 50 meters up a slope from a local road.

Around 8:15 a.m., five men hired by a subcontractor appeared at the site. Wearing helmets and face masks, they spread out along the river bank carrying rakes and large dustpans. They filled bags with leaves, stems, snow and soil and used a small truck to carry the waste to a nearby collection point.

Before the noon break, however, one of the workers began kicking a pile of fallen leaves into the river. The worker had a pink line around his helmet, designating him as the person in charge of the group. The river eventually meets up with the Ukedogawa river, which passes through Fukushima Prefecture before reaching the Pacific.

The following day, a camera was positioned farther up the river. One worker dumped leaves that had gathered on a rock into the river. Another pushed in a tree trunk. After the work was done, workers used the river water to clean off the dirt that had accumulated on their rubber boots.

On Dec. 18, two workers for a subcontractor to the joint venture tasked with decontaminating Iitate were found using a pressurized sprayer to clean the parking lot in front of a post office. Some of the water used in the cleaning splashed onto the sidewalk and some flowed into a gutter that eventually reaches a river. An employee for Taisei Corp., which was part of the joint venture, was at the site serving as a supervisor.

The airborne radiation level near the gutter before the cleaning water flowed in was 0.8 microsievert per hour. The radiation level near the cleaning water hovered between 1.9 and 2.9 microsieverts. The larger figure is close to the cutoff point in determining if residents should evacuate.

A worker who was asked why the water was not being collected only said, "I don't know because I am not in charge."

An official with the subcontractor who was later asked about the incident said, "There is a strong possibility that water used in the cleaning flowed into the gutter."

Photos were also taken of workers using pressurized sprayers in Kawauchi on Dec. 17. Although water from the sprayers was observed seeping into the soil, an official with Obayashi Corp., which is part of the joint venture handling work in that village, said, "The water and soil were collected in an appropriate manner in accordance with work procedures."

Also on Dec. 17, a worker in Naraha was observed using a pressurized sprayer to clean the veranda of a private home. Because no protective sheet was installed, water splashed the walls of neighboring structures.

Under Environment Ministry rules, all water used in decontamination must be collected.

However, a man in his 40s who was in charge of the site at Naraha said: "The radiation level does not drop just by wiping. Almost all work involves cleaning with water and letting the water drain off."

In some cases, radiation levels at homes have even increased after decontamination, leading some workers to suspect that radioactive materials were blown into the area by wind.

(This article was compiled from reports by Tamiyuki Kihara and Kenji Oda.)

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