

CROOKED CLEANUP: Environment Ministry failed to act on Asahi tip-off

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Environment Ministry officials in December received details and photographic evidence of shoddy decontamination work in Fukushima Prefecture, but they dithered on taking action by citing “manners” and the need to confirm the information.

New Environment Minister Nobuteru Ishihara has also been slow to react since The Asahi Shimbun ran its first story on the issue on Jan. 4.

Asahi Shimbun reporters, who witnessed slipshod work at 13 locations between Dec. 11 and 18, visited the Fukushima Office for Environmental Restoration, which is responsible for overseeing decontamination work around the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, on Dec. 25.

The reporters told a senior representative that general contractors instructed workers to dump potentially contaminated vegetation and not to bother with the proper recovery of water used for cleaning.

The journalists explained about the 13 locations and dates and showed photographs taken at the sites.

The office representative said it is a matter of “manners.”

“It appears that workers (dumped vegetation) not out of malice but because they removed more radioactive materials than they had expected,” the representative said.

The same day, Asahi Shimbun reporters met with two senior officials at the Environment Ministry in Tokyo and provided the list of 13 locations.

“We cannot do anything unless we confirm the facts,” Masaaki Kobayashi, director-general of the Environment Management Bureau, said. “We will contact the Fukushima office.”

The ministry also appeared to largely ignore information about the dodgy decontamination work from a person on the front line.

A worker in his 20s who said he was ordered to dump vegetation sent a fax to the Environment Ministry in Tokyo and the Fukushima Office for Environmental Restoration on Dec. 26.

The fax explained what was happening at the work sites and contained his real name and e-mail address. But the man had not received any response as of Jan. 8.

Asahi Shimbun reporters visited the Fukushima Office for Environmental Restoration again on Dec. 26 and showed director Takashi Omura a photograph of a site supervisor kicking fallen leaves into a river in Tamura.

“It is a grave problem if it is true,” Omura said. “I will immediately consult with those in charge.”

However, Omura did not discuss the issue with Environment Ministry officials in Tokyo until Dec. 28, the last business day of 2012 for government workers.

By that day, two general contractors contacted by The Asahi Shimbun had informed Omura's office that water used for cleaning may have not been properly recovered at decontamination sites.

In late afternoon on Dec. 28, Kobayashi said, “I do not know about the situation because I have not received reports from (the Fukushima office).”

Local government leaders in Fukushima Prefecture expressed outrage after reading The Asahi Shimbun's report on Jan. 4. Omura called them and apologized for "causing worries."

Yoshimi Okunishi, a councilor at the Minister's Secretariat at the Environment Ministry, told reporters in Tokyo that the ministry will investigate whether the report is true.

"Our ministry will not move unless a newspaper article appears," one employee said.

The ministry did not begin questioning general contractors until Jan. 7, when it set up a task force on the issue headed by Senior Vice Environment Minister Shinji Inoue.

But subcontractors and workers have changed at many decontamination sites since the start of the new year, which could make it difficult for the task force to obtain first-hand information.

On Jan. 9, Inoue visited Tamura, where the site supervisor kicked leaves into the river on Dec. 14. The leaves on the ground were gone, and it was impossible to tell if they were removed by workers or fell into the river and flowed away.

The response of Ishihara, who became environment minister on Dec. 26, has been unclear.

Ishihara and the Environment Ministry also plan to rely on voluntary investigations by general contractors instead of interviewing front-line workers.

"We will not have enough information to make a judgment until we read reports (from the contractors)," Ishihara said.

The ministry expects to receive the reports by Jan. 11 and compile measures on Jan. 18 to prevent a recurrence.

During questioning on Jan. 7, the companies only admitted that water used for cleaning was not properly recovered in two instances in December.

Ishihara did not come to his Environment Ministry office on Jan. 4, the first business day for government workers this year.

When asked what he did on the day, Ishihara said on the night of Jan. 8, "I do not remember."

The Asahi Shimbun asked the same question through the ministry's public relations office. A written reply said Ishihara issued instructions to a senior vice minister to confirm facts and respond strictly.

Ishihara did not appear in the Environment Ministry until Jan. 6, when he attended a briefing scheduled from last year. He and other senior ministry officials discussed what to do and decided to set up the task force.

Ministry officials hope to minimize the fallout of the scandal because only general contractors can handle the contracts, which are awarded for each municipality.

The officials have relied on the companies to carry out the decontamination project worth 650 billion yen (\$7.4 billion), an extremely large amount for a ministry project.

Slipshod work can constitute violations of not only government contracts but also a special measures law on dealing with contaminated waste.

If serious offenses are found, the ministry could be forced to exclude a general contractor from the project.

(This article was compiled from reports by Toshio Tada, Tamiyuki Kihara and Miki Aoki.)

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