

CROOKED CLEANUP: Government mishandled complaints about shoddy cleanup work

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Environment Ministry officials failed to act on a flood of complaints from residents in Fukushima Prefecture about companies carrying out shoddy decontamination work.

No effort was even made to record the number or contents of those complaints, in part because staffing shortages made such work difficult, and many of the companies involved were not instructed on how to improve their performance.

The Asahi Shimbun broke a story on Jan. 4 about shoddy decontamination work at three municipalities in Fukushima Prefecture that could constitute violations of contracts signed with the Environment Ministry and infractions of a law that prohibits the dumping of radioactive waste materials.

Following the March 2011 accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, the Environment Ministry set aside an initial amount of 650 billion yen (\$7.4 billion) for decontamination work.

The ministry established a local office in Fukushima Prefecture to oversee the work, which began last summer and involved cleaning areas within 20 meters of buildings and roads.

Soon after the work began, local residents called to complain that the grass was not being mowed properly and that water used for cleaning had leaked.

Such observations could constitute violations of the work rules the Environment Ministry had established for the construction companies and subcontractors that were contracted to do the work.

However, an official said, "Because there was a continuous stream of phone calls coming in, we were unable to keep records of every call."

In response to questions from Asahi, an official at the Fukushima local office said, "Whenever we received a complaint, we cautioned those doing the work to follow what was written in the contracts."

At the same time, however, officials also admitted that no records were kept of the specific contents of each complaint, the companies involved or the total number of complaints. Companies that were the subject of a large number of complaints were also not singled out for special instructions about improving their work. As a result, officials at the local office said it was impossible to determine what response was made to every individual complaint.

In addition, information about such complaints never reached the Environment Ministry headquarters in Tokyo, which is tasked with overall supervision of the decontamination work.

One high-ranking ministry official said, "We were not even aware that a large number of complaints had come in."

An official at the local Fukushima office said, "Considering that we are using taxpayer money, we have not been able to provide sufficient explanations to local residents or the general public."

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism has a system for organizing complaints submitted about public works projects and using that information to provide guidance to the companies involved.

However, the Environment Ministry lacks the know-how to handle large public works projects and its oversight function is inadequate. The local Fukushima office only has about 200 staff, with most involved mainly in patrolling local areas and helping at meetings where explanations are given to local residents. That meant there were only a few workers on hand to field complaints.

Doubts have also been raised about the quality of the responses by the hotline set up by Environment Ministry headquarters.

A worker who was ordered by the on-site supervisor of a construction company to dump vegetation in Naraha, Fukushima Prefecture, called the Environment Ministry and admitted to dumping vegetation at the bottom of a slope. The person who took the call said, "We will pass on the information to the relevant section."

However, orders for such dumping continued for more than a month until work in that area was completed. Under the rules established by the Environment Ministry, the cleared vegetation should have been placed in bags and moved to temporary storage areas.

The worker who blew the whistle said, "Because they didn't ask for my contact number, nothing changed. It was meaningless to have made the call in the first place."

The worker did send in a document late last year that outlined what was observed.

(This article was written by Tamiyuki Kihara and Miki Aoki.)

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