

Govt must take responsibility on N-reactor reactivation

The Yomiuri Shimbun

Confusion within the government is evident over procedures to make judgments on whether to allow the restart of idled reactors at nuclear power stations. It is necessary to quickly establish a system to enable smooth reactivation of the reactors.

The government's Nuclear Regulation Authority has decided it will confirm the safety of nuclear reactors but will not be involved in making judgments on their reactivation.

NRA Chairman Shunichi Tanaka said judgments on whether to restart nuclear reactors should be made by the ministry and agency in charge of energy affairs, and other NRA commissioners agreed to this stance.

The NRA, launched last month, is tasked with screening the safety of nuclear reactors from specialized and scientific viewpoints. Given the purpose of the law on establishing the NRA, the board's stance on the matter is largely understandable.

It is essential that the NRA explain the results of their safety screenings, as well as the grounds for their conclusions, to local governments and residents near reactors in an easy-to-understand manner. We hope the NRA will take thorough measures for that end.

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Too much remains unclear

What is problematic is that it remains unclear how the Prime Minister's Office and other government bodies, including the Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry, will be involved in the reactor restart decision-making process.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura said it had not been considered that the government would hold meetings of concerned Cabinet ministers or others to make such judgments. Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Yukio Edano also has said it will be the utility companies that operate nuclear plants who will work to obtain local consent.

It cannot be helped if the government is seen as trying to shirk the most difficult task of persuading local governments and residents.

The government's official policy is to use nuclear plants as an important source of

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The government's official policy is to use nuclear plants as an important source of electricity, after their safety is confirmed. If the government leaves all processes concerning reactivation to electricity utilities, we would consider it irresponsible.

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Officials must be at forefront

Local distrust in utility companies is deep-seated. In the process to decide the restart of the Nos. 3 and 4 reactors of Kansai Electric Power Co.'s Oi nuclear plant this summer, relevant Cabinet ministers made persistent efforts to persuade local governments. The ministers also held consultations with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, and reactivation was realized at last.

Unless the government visibly takes on responsibilities, it will be hard for local governments to give consent to reactivation.

Regarding nuclear reactors whose safety is confirmed by the NRA, the government needs to make judgments on reactivation from comprehensive viewpoints with such aspects as the balance in supply and demand taken into account.

In fact, it was the administration of former Prime Minister Naoto Kan that abruptly brought up the idea of requiring stress tests to check the disaster-resistance of reactors, thus raising hurdles and failing to allow the restart of reactors whose regular inspections had been completed.

For the most part, the Noda administration has basically stuck to its predecessor's policy course.

However, Noda once said, "Giving consideration to impacts on the people's daily lives and the economy, the government will be responsible for making final judgments [on reactivation]."

He should not change this stance.

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