

Minister: Japan to set energy policy but 'no stance' on nuclear

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REUTERS

Japan is scheduled to set national energy policy early next week, national policy minister Motohisa Furukawa said on Sept. 4, although he said the government had not taken any particular position on the main question over the role of nuclear power.

An anti-nuclear clamour has grown in Japan since an earthquake and tsunami damaged the Fukushima nuclear power plant in March last year, triggering the world's worst nuclear crisis in 25 years.

The government, mindful of public opinion ahead of an election, had been hinting that it might set a target of eliminating atomic power by 2030 -- a big shift for an economy that had planned to boost nuclear energy before last year's accident.

Furukawa said the ruling Democratic Party would draw up the policy at the end of the week.

"The party plans to compile the policy this week, and based on the party's discussions, the government is on course to set its policy sometime between this weekend and early next week," he told reporters.

But he suggested the government might dodge the crucial question over the long-term role of nuclear in the energy mix.

"The government has not adopted any particular stance," he said when asked if the new policy would contain a reference to "zero nuclear."

The government is considering three options for its energy portfolio: reduce nuclear power to zero as soon as possible, aim for 15 percent by 2030, or seek a 20-25 percent share by the same date.

The share was about 30 percent before last year's accident, which forced the government to scrap a 2010 plan to boost nuclear power's share to more than half of electricity needs by 2030.

Most experts have expected Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to opt for a policy that would put nuclear power's share at about 15 percent of electricity production by 2030.

But anti-nuclear protests and strong support for the zero option had forced a rethink, experts and politicians said.

Business lobbies have warned that an aggressive program to end nuclear power would force up electricity rates and could push companies and jobs overseas.

Furukawa acknowledged that while a majority of people wanted to be rid of nuclear power, there were different points of view on whether that was achievable and how soon it could be done.

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Furukawa said he and some other ministers had raised the possibility that "basic energy policy" would be reviewed later.

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