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## More residents refuse nuclear benefits after Fukushima disaster

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The number of households declining benefits for living near nuclear plants has nearly doubled since the Fukushima disaster, reflecting growing opposition to a system long criticized as paying off citizens to promote nuclear power.

In fiscal 2011, 14 prefectures paid 7.6 billion yen (\$87 million) in benefits to 1.03 million households, according to figures obtained by The Asahi Shimbun through interviews and freedom-of-information requests.

In that year, 171 households declined the benefits, an increase of 80 percent from 94 the previous year. The number ranged between 80 and 100 in preceding years.

The figures exclude Fukui Prefecture, which does not compile statistics on those people.

A 64-year-old resident of Hitachi, Ibaraki Prefecture, said the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant caused by the tsunami in March 2011 prompted him to refuse part of the benefits.

“I have received the benefits without thinking about it, but they are nothing but bribery,” he said. “We feel indebted if we continue to receive them even though they are a small amount.”

He said he did not refuse the full amount because he wants Tokyo Electric Power Co., the operator of the stricken Fukushima nuclear plant, which serves the prefecture, to continue sending him payment notices so that he can voice his opposition in response.

“I want to show every year that I do not want the money” by refusing part of the benefits, he said.

The increase in refusers was particularly noticeable in Fukushima, Aomori and Ibaraki prefectures.

In Fukushima Prefecture, 46 households declined the benefits, compared with 28 in fiscal 2010. Only four municipalities in the prefecture paid benefits because seven decided against it after the triple meltdown at the Fukushima plant.

Fifty households declined in Aomori Prefecture, up nearly 80 percent from 28, while 25 refused the payments in Ibaraki Prefecture, a more than sixfold increase from four.

The benefits, funded by taxes collected as part of electricity bills, are paid by utilities on behalf of municipal governments.

The amounts are based on the power generation capacity of nuclear power plants and other factors. The annual individual amounts in fiscal 2011 ranged from 2,172 yen to 36,000 yen.

A man who lives only 9 km from a nuclear power plant in the village of Tokai, Ibaraki Prefecture, declined the full amount of 4,368

yen for fiscal 2011.

“I do not want to receive money collected to promote nuclear power,” he said. “I wanted to directly inform TEPCO that I do not want nuclear power plants.”

The 65-year-old said he did not pay special attention to nuclear power until after the Fukushima disaster. “The last thing I want to do is to leave the world tainted with radioactivity to our children and grandchildren.”

Yasue Ashihara, who has opposed the planned expansion of the Shimane nuclear power plant, suspects utilities use the benefit system to keep tabs on nuclear opponents.

“Only people strongly opposed to nuclear power take the trouble of refusing the benefits,” Ashihara, 59, said. “I think the system has been used as a tool to learn about who they are.”

Ashihara said the benefits are not expected to silence potential nuclear opponents because the amounts are so small.

Residents continue to receive the benefits once they specify their bank accounts or other means for receiving them. To refuse them, residents need to submit a written form to utilities.

In 2002, reports surfaced that utilities had compiled a list of refusers and their beliefs, labeling some as nuclear opponents, and provided the information to local governments. Local governments said they have changed the procedures and are no longer aware of the reasons why households decline the benefits.

A member of an anti-nuclear group in Niigata Prefecture said the benefits are paid as compensation for inconveniencing residents living near nuclear power plants.

Several people seek her advice on the benefits every year, and she tells them that there is no problem receiving the payments.

“You do not have to support nuclear power if you receive the benefits,” she said.

The system was introduced in fiscal 1981 to seek understanding and cooperation for nuclear power. It is said to derive from Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka’s suggestion in 1973 that electricity charges should be lowered in areas around nuclear power plants.

In a Diet session in 1982, a lawmaker said the benefits are nothing but favors doled out to residents and could jeopardize discussions on the safety of nuclear power plants.

A senior official at the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy told the Diet session that the government cannot promote construction of nuclear power plants unless residents receive some gains.

The agency official explained that the system was a temporary measure, although it has continued for more than 30 years.

Shuji Shimizu, a professor of regional finance at Fukushima University, said the benefits--cash directly given to individuals--are a blatant example of dispensing favors.

“I think a growing number of people in areas around nuclear power plants are saying ‘no’ to such a practice by rejecting the benefits,” Shimizu said.

(This article was compiled from reports by Satoshi Otani, Takuho Shiraki and Atsushi Otaka.)

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