CABINET INTERVIEW

NRA has final reactor say-so: Motegi

By KAZUAKI NAGATA
Staff writer

No matter what, no reactor will be restarted unless the Nuclear Regulation Authority has confirmed its safety, according to new trade and industry minister Toshimitsu Motegi.

"We will entrust the safety of reactors to the NRA, which is independent. There will be no restarts if safety is not confirmed," the new METI chief said in a group interview with The Japan Times and other media outlets Friday.

Motegi stressed that safety would come first before "any other factors," including the potential economic damage from staying away from nuclear power or unpopular spikes in electricity prices that consumers and industries may face.

But if the NRA judges a reactor safe, the government will allow it to be reactivated, said Motegi, a member of the same ruling Liberal Democratic Party that promoted the nuclear power safety myth over the past five decades of nearly uninterrupted rule.

Asked if he felt the LDP should take responsibility for recklessly promoting nuclear power under the NRA's predecessor, which was disbanded for failing to install safeguards at the quake- and tsunami-battered Fukushima No. 1 power plant that melted down, Motegi said, "We have no intention to raise the issue of reactivating or restarting reactors for the sake of abandoning the nation's energy sources."

"I think the way to go forward is to ensure safe operation," Motegi said.

Motegi has been persona non grata in the nuclear industry since he arrived in the Diet. He has been a vocal critic of the industry's safety credentials for years and was lambasted by Prime Minister Naoto Kan's government for his unrelenting criticism.

"I hope my criticism will help strengthen the NRA's safety measures," Motegi said. "We have an obligation to protect the country and the people."
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Power plant that melted down in 2011, Motegi said the LDP came up with the idea of a strict regulatory like the NRA after reflecting on the Fukushima crisis and is committed to supporting the new body.

The NRA was established in September under the Democratic Party of Japan. It is drafting a new set of national safety guidelines that are expected to be completed around summer, which means no reactor restarts until then.

As for the government's new long-term energy plan the DPJ started to draft on the assumption that Japan would be free of atomic power by 2040, Motegi said his ministry plans to complete the plan also around summer.

At his inaugural press conference Thursday, Motegi said the LDP-New Komeito coalition will rethink the DPJ's zero-nuclear target and aims to come up with the best energy mix within 10 years.

He also said at the same conference that the new government will not immediately abandon Japan's trouble-prone nuclear fuel cycle policy, which is aimed at establishing a renewable supply of atomic fuel.

Japan committed to setting up the cycle in the 1950s, but the process has dragged on for decades as key facilities, particularly the Monju prototype fast-breeder reactor and the Rokkasho fuel-reprocessing plant, have struggled to overcome technical problems.

Also, abandoning the fuel cycle policy will draw fire from Aomori Prefecture, which hosts the Rokkasho plant and is concerned it may end up becoming a repository for radioactive waste.

Motegi said now is not the time to make the final decision on whether to abandon the policy, so "while the fuel cycle policy will be continued, we will consider its historical background and try to solve various issues related to it," he said.

Motegi, a University of Tokyo and Harvard graduate, will be juggling multiple portfolios. In addition to METI chief, he will be the LDP's policy chief and minister in charge of financial services and administrative reforms.