

NATIONAL

NRA plans its own probe of Fukushima crisis

AP, KYODO

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The Nuclear Regulation Authority said Wednesday it will conduct its own probe into the country's nuclear crisis to address key unanswered questions, adding the task will likely take decades.

The March 2011 earthquake and tsunami cut power and destroyed vital cooling systems at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, causing meltdowns at three of its reactors. Several groups have already published the findings of their own investigations into the crisis, largely blaming the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl on botched crisis management, government-industry collusion and the tsunami.

But questions remain, and experts still suspect that the quake, not the tsunami, may have triggered the meltdowns. The NRA, which debuted last September to replace the discredited Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, said this issue, which could affect anti-quake measures at nuclear facilities nationwide, will be part of its investigation.

A government-appointed accident investigation panel was skeptical in its report that the magnitude 9.0 earthquake, by itself, caused catastrophic damage to key equipment of the three reactors that suffered meltdowns, while another Diet-appointed panel pointed to a possibility that the quake damaged equipment necessary for ensuring safety.

The new panel is also expected to focus on specifying which part of the reactors' primary containment vessels was damaged as well as clarifying the condition of the melted fuel, the NRA said.

The authority said the investigation will also look into other issues, including how much and from where radiation leaked at the plant. The probe, to be conducted by a panel that includes outside experts, will start by the end of April and could take decades because parts of the plant are still too dangerous to access or are in otherwise poor condition.

"Nobody has inspected the site very closely and we still have to sort out a lot of technical questions that remain unresolved," said Tetsuo Omura, in charge of reactor safety. "We have conflicting views, particularly about how the earthquake had impacted key safeguard

equipment, a key question that needs to be addressed.”

The plant suffered an extensive power failure last week after a rat short-circuited an outdoor switchboard, cutting fresh cooling water from four of its seven fuel storage pools for more than a day, a reminder that the fragile complex is running on makeshift equipment and is full of blind spots.

Kyushu Electric sent staff to back government nuclear promo event

Kyodo

FUKUOKA

Kyushu Electric Power Co. had its employees and related parties attend a local public hearing organized by a government panel in August 2005 in the lead-up to compiling the national atomic energy policy outline, company officials said Thursday.

The utility mobilized 150 people, or about 80 percent of those who attended the event in Saga. Of the 21 who spoke, 11 were Kyushu Electric employees, the officials said. A total of 179 people attended the event organized by the Atomic Energy Commission. Kyushu Electric's employees offered opinions, including that nuclear power is the only “trump card” for addressing energy issues.

A company official expressed regret over the matter, saying, “We will work companywide on making our corporate activities transparent, improving our organizational climate and preventing a recurrence.”

Kyushu Electric was involved in a similar scandal in 2011 when it was revealed that the utility it sought to manipulate public opinion in favor of restarting halted reactors at its Genkai nuclear plant in Saga Prefecture.

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