

New Disaster Guidelines Cloud Outlook For Idle Reactors

TOKYO (Nikkei)--The expansion of disaster readiness zones around nuclear power plants is starting to have a subtle but noticeable effect on plans for building new reactors and restarting idle ones.

Under new guidelines issued Wednesday by the Nuclear Regulation Authority, communities within a 30km radius of atomic power plants need to prepare to evacuate in case of an accident. This so-called urgent protective action planning zone, or UPZ, previously extended out only 8-10km.

For power companies, the expansion may mean having to persuade more communities to live with nuclear reactors.

Electric Power Development Co. (9513), also known as J-Power, is building a nuclear power plant in the Aomori Prefecture town of Oma on the northern tip of Japan's main island. A 30km-radius circle around the site extends across the Tsugaru Strait to Hakodate, the third-largest city in Hokkaido.

Mayor Toshiki Kudo says he has no thought of drawing up a disaster readiness plan as required by the new guidelines. The city will seek an injunction against building the plant next spring, he says.

As for restarting idle reactors, Nuclear Regulation Authority Chairman Shunichi Tanaka says these disaster plans are a "minimum requirement" for approval.

Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Yukio Edano weighed in on the issue Friday, saying the guidelines serve as a "reference" for defining the "local community" around a nuclear plant.

This suggests power companies need to come to an understanding with all the local governments within a 30km radius of nuclear plants. Until now, they have been bound by safety agreements with only the municipalities where plants are located and their respective prefectural governments, and sought their consent for reactivating reactors after periodic inspections. More municipalities may now call for such agreements as a result of the 30km UPZ.

Many local governments around nuclear plants complain they run the risk of fallout but receive none of the national subsidies that host municipalities do.

"This is not going to work unless the national government straightens things out," says a prefectural official.

But Tokyo appears reluctant to get involved. When it comes to local consent, the government will explain that nuclear plants are an "important power source," but "primarily, the operators will have to do the heavy lifting," Edano said.

They will face a public increasingly hostile to nuclear energy.

"Unless (Edano) and (Nuclear Accident Minister Hiroyuki Nagahama) get out in front, local governments won't be convinced," says a senior official in the Nuclear Regulation Authority's administrative agency.

This could mean even reactors the authority deems safe sit idle for want of local approval.

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