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Nuke plant operators put tab on new safety standards at 1 trillion yen

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THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

Japan's 10 nuclear power plant operators said it will cost close to 1 trillion yen (\$10.87 billion) to bring them in compliance with government-mandated safety standards on disaster preparedness, according to an Asahi Shimbun survey.

The final tab could increase further because the companies currently cannot accurately estimate the expenses that will be required to take measures against disasters.

The utilities cannot restart any idle reactors unless they meet the safety standards. Currently 48 of the nation's 50 nuclear reactors are offline.

The draft outline of the new standards, presented in late January by the Nuclear Regulation Authority, calls on operators to take broad measures against natural disasters and accidents. But some details of the new standards have yet to be determined, so plant operators have not finalized specifications of some safety measures.

The 10 companies estimated the costs at 998.7 billion yen for their 15 plants, excluding the crippled Fukushima No. 1 plant and the nearby No. 2 plant, both operated by Tokyo Electric Power Co.

The costs mainly consist of expenses for emergency safety measures, such as the construction of levees to guard against tsunami. The measures also include the provision of emergency power supply vehicles, which were required by the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, the predecessor of the NRA, immediately after the March 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Kansai Electric Power Co. projects it will have to spend 38 billion yen by the end of March and a total of 285.5 billion yen by the end of March 2018, the largest amount among the 10 operators.

Kansai Electric hosts 11 reactors at its three nuclear plants of Mihama, Oi and Takahama. Its degree of dependence on nuclear power generation was about 50 percent in fiscal 2010.

Because of this high dependency, early restarts of idle reactors are necessary for the company to improve its financial performance.

Chubu Electric Power Co. estimated the costs needed to take measures against tsunami at its Hamaoka plant at 150 billion yen. The Hamaoka plant is located in an area of a possible Tokai earthquake, which seismology experts expect to occur in the near future.

Chubu Electric is currently constructing a 1.6-kilometer-long levee at the Hamaoka plant. The utility originally planned to erect an 18-meter-tall levee, but the government's predicted highest tsunami exceeded that height, making it necessary for Chubu Electric to spend an additional 10 billion yen to raise the levee by 4 meters.

Kyushu Electric Power Co. estimated it will need 200 billion yen to meet the new regulations.

The new safety standards are expected to go into effect in July.

The NRA plans to strictly uphold the regulations so that plant operators will take the necessary measures to guard against severe accidents, earthquakes and tsunami.

(This article was written by Jin Nishikawa and Ryuta Koike.)

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