

NATIONAL

Oi reactors to get early NRA check to stay on

KYODO

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To keep the only nuclear plant now online from shutting down, the Nuclear Regulation Authority said Tuesday it will inspect Kansai Electric Power Co.'s Oi atomic facility in Fukui Prefecture according to new safety standards prior to their official July debut.

After a regular meeting at which the watchdog compiled a basic policy for the introduction of the reactor safety standards, NRA Chairman Shunichi Tanaka said the Oi plant's reactors 3 and 4 will be inspected possibly by April.

If no problems are found, the NRA will authorize their continued operation until September, when they have to undergo routine maintenance, Tanaka said.

The NRA may face criticism for giving special treatment to the Oi reactors. Safety checks at the 48 reactors currently idled will only start in July, when the new standards take effect. These checks are required before any reactor can restart.

Reactors 3 and 4 at the four-reactor Oi complex were restarted last July and are currently the only ones online among the 50 surviving commercial reactors in Japan. The 48 others remain shut down amid safety concerns stemming from the meltdown crisis at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima No. 1 power plant triggered by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Tanaka said the NRA thinks that reactors 3 and 4 at the Oi plant will clear most of the new safety standards. "We cannot deny the possibility that the reactors may not fulfill one or two items" under the new standards, but the NRA intends to closely examine them, he said.

Tanaka added that if the NRA were to require online reactors to shut down every time the regulatory body comes up with new safety standards, it would hinder efforts to introduce new standards based on the latest findings.

The new safety standards are expected to call for the facilities and equipment of offline reactors to undergo checks in two stages.

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