

With government wary, decision on reactor restarts up in the air

October 04, 2012

2

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

Having come under fire for reactivating two nuclear reactors ostensibly to avert power shortages during summer, the government now seems to be ducking responsibility for authorizing further restarts.

The Nuclear Regulation Authority says its role extends only to confirming the safety of a reactor. After that, it says, it is up to the government or electric utilities to decide whether to bring one back online.

"We are responsible for confirming whether safety standards are met from a scientific and technological standpoint," said the authority's chairman, Shunichi Tanaka, on Oct. 3. "We will not be involved in (a restart decision based on) electricity supply and demand and socioeconomic issues."

But the government says the NRA, set up in September as an independent agency, has sole authority to sanction a restart and that the government will not be involved in any such decision.

"As an important source of electricity, a reactor will be utilized when the NRA confirms its safety from an independent standpoint," Chief Cabinet Secretary Osamu Fujimura told a news conference on Oct. 3.

A critical time will come in July when the NRA plans to introduce new standards to confirm the safety of reactors.

The NRA will not approve any restart unless it is able to satisfy itself that a reactor meets the new safety standards. NRA officials made clear that no reactor will automatically be restarted even after safety issues are addressed.

In June, the government, citing "its own responsibility," authorized the restarts of the No. 3 and No. 4 reactors of the Oi nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture. The facility is operated by Kansai Electric Power Co.

The other 48 reactors in Japan have been all kept offline after the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant was crippled by the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and ministers concerned with the issue analyzed electricity supply and demand after the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, one of the NRA's predecessors, confirmed the two reactors were safe.

Industry minister Yukio Edano met with officials of local governments that host the plant to win their approval.

The decision sparked strong opposition from the public, symbolized by weekly protests in front of the prime minister's office, and dealt a blow to the Cabinet's approval ratings.

Noda has said the Oi reactor restarts "split public opinion into two."

Fujimura said the government has no plans to follow the same procedures for future restarts. Edano also said electric utilities, not the government, will obtain approval from host local governments to go ahead with restarts.

Hiroomi Makino, mayor of Tomari in Hokkaido, was scathing of the government's apparent ducking of the issue.

"Any decision on a reactor restart must be made by the government and ultimately by the prime minister," he said. "I cannot but believe that the government is shunning responsibility by leaving the decision in the NRA's hands."

Hokkaido Electric Power Co. is seeking to restart reactors at the Tomari nuclear power plant in Makino's village before power demand rises in winter.

Under the Innovative Strategy for Energy and the Environment, adopted in September, the government set a goal of scrapping nuclear power generation during the 2030s but said it will utilize nuclear energy as an important source of electricity in the meantime.

But Japan lacks a framework to decide whether a reactor needs to be restarted based on electricity supply and demand, among other factors, with the government and the NRA both saying they will not be involved in the process.

Fujimura acknowledged that there is no mechanism to keep a reactor from being restarted as long as its safety is confirmed. Edano also indicated that decisions on restarts will not necessarily be made for individual reactors.

A senior industry ministry official said utilities will restart reactors once their safety is confirmed based on the new standards and approval is obtained from host local governments.

Utilities are eager to restart reactors because of increased fuel costs for thermal power generation to make up for lost capacity at nuclear plants.

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN