

Japan City Declares Nuclear “Decontamination Month”

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MINAMI-SOMA, Japan (AP) — It is a daunting task. Contamination from the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl has spread far and wide, across fields and farms, rivers and forests. Tens of thousands of residents have been forced to flee their homes.

But, shovelful by shovelful, one half-empty city on the edge of the evacuation zone is fighting to bring its future back.

Feeling forgotten and left largely to fend for themselves by the central government, officials in Minami-Soma, about 12 miles (20 kilometers) away from the tsunami-crippled Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear facility, have designated August as "Decontamination Month" in a campaign to woo spooked residents home.

"We decided that we could not sit by and wait until Tokyo figured out what to do," said town official Yoshiaki Yokota. "It's an enormous task, but we have to start somewhere."

Before the disaster, nearly 70,000 people lived in Minami-Soma. But, nearly six months later and despite relatively low radiation readings in most parts of town, more than 30,000 have left, nearly one-third of them from areas outside the official evacuation zone.

City officials fear that unless action is taken to demonstrate most of the town is safe for habitation, many may never return.

So, for the past week, the city has contracted local crews to hose down its schools, parks and community centers. The goal is to reduce by more than one-half the levels of radioactivity measured at places in the city where people gather.

The campaign has created a buzz of activity in the still-shaken town.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

The work crews, clad in hazmat suits, also use bulldozers and powershovels to remove contaminated topsoil from public places, particularly school playgrounds. The washoff from the hoses and the mounds of contaminated topsoil are then moved to less-used areas and buried in huge trenches.

"I'm glad to see them here," Kiyomi Takahashi said as she watched a crew wash down a kindergarten adjacent to the school where her daughters are due to begin the first and sixth grade next week. "I still have my concerns, but it's important that our city is out there showing that it is doing something."

For the time being, a large swath of Minami-Soma remains completely off limits.

That is because it is within a 12-mile (20-kilometer) no-go zone set up by Tokyo days after the March 11 tsunami touched off meltdowns, explosions and fires at the Fukushima plant. All told, nearly 21,000 people were killed or remain missing after the tsunami, which devastated Japan's northeast coast.

But outside the no-go zone, contamination levels vary dramatically, depending on the local terrain. Most of Minami-Soma is registering below government safety limits, meaning residents who evacuated earlier in the crisis may now return home if they so choose.

Still, most have stayed away because they fear for their health.

"We want to show them that it is safe, and that we are doing everything we can to make it even safer," Yokota said. "Part of what we are doing is symbolic. It is intended to reassure our residents. It's also just to show that we will not sit idly by."

Some experts have reservations about the decontamination campaign.

Hiroaki Koide, a radiation specialist and associate professor at Kyoto University's Research Reactor Institute, said simply removing the top three inches (5 centimeters) of soil has been shown to reduce radiation levels by about 90 percent.

But he noted that the trees, roads and farmland near the decontaminated schools cannot be easily cleansed — and radiation from them can spread in the larger environment. Further, babies, children and pregnant women are the most vulnerable to radiation-related illnesses, and are generally advised to avoid exposure whenever possible.

"Any exposure would pose a health risk, no matter how small," Koide said. "There is no dose that we should call safe."

Another problem that has slowed the central government from acting to help is what to do with the irradiated soil, washoff and debris in the long-term.

"We have been trying to find storage and waste-processing plants, but so far we haven't been very successful," acknowledged Goshi Hosono, the minister in charge of the nuclear crisis response. "We are trying to persuade waste-processing plants,

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but there are local residents who oppose that."

He stressed that Tokyo is not blind to the dilemma of communities like Minami-Soma, however.

"We must try to remove contamination from the residents' daily lives as quickly as possible," he said earlier this week.

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Associated Press writer Mari Yamaguchi contributed to this story from Tokyo.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/27/2014 - 8:08pm):

<http://www.chem.info/news/2011/08/japan-city-declares-nuclear-%E2%80%9Cdecontamination-month%E2%80%9D>