

Fukushima residents tour German renewable village

MELISSA EDDY - Associated Press - Associated Press

A group of residents from the radiation-stricken area around Japan's tsunami-hit nuclear reactors and a Tokyo actor are visiting Germany to learn how renewable energy could work in their homeland.

Among them is Tatsuko Okara, an organic farmer who lives 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the disabled Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant. Okara told The Associated Press on Wednesday that she first began to worry about the impact a nuclear accident could have on her family after the 1986 meltdown in Chernobyl.

After the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan which caused massive radiation leaks, Okara said she decided to devote herself to sparking an energy revolution in her own nation, such as that which is taking place in Germany.

"I would like to see Japan move away from nuclear energy," Okara said. "But we will need another energy source, that's why we are here to learn how we could make it happen."

The group, organized and led by representatives of Greenpeace Japan, arrived Wednesday in the northeastern German village of Feldheim to learn how its 145 residents have taken advantage of the energy generated by a nearby windfarm and a biofuel plant that burns the waste from a local pig farm to become an entirely self-sustaining, energy-positive village.

The project has its roots in the 1990s, when farmers in the area agreed to rent some of their land to a young researcher wanting to install a wind turbine. In the following years, several dozen turbines sprouted out of the once fallow field — but Feldheim's 145 residents didn't benefit from any of the energy produced in their own back yard.

They made an agreement to receive power from the windpark in partial return for the use of the land, resulting in a 1/4 to 1/3 cut in their energy bills. They then added solar panels and a plant to burn the biofuels they were already producing — in short they drew on the natural resources at hand.

"We are willing to tell you how we did it," Mayor Michael Knape told the group. "If you want, we can even help you build a Feldheim in Japan."

In the wake of the Fukushima disaster, Chancellor Angela Merkel's government voted in June to shutter its network of 17 nuclear reactors by 2020 and instead make the expansion of renewable sources the focus of its energy policy. Germany draws 23 percent of its energy from nuclear power, compared to Japan, which drew

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some 30 percent of its power from nuclear reactors before the accident.

By comparison, renewable sources now provide Germans with 17 percent of their power, as compared with 9 percent in Japan.

Actor Taro Yamamoto, a resident of Tokyo who has also devoted himself to the fight against nuclear power since the accident, said the first step to bringing about change is for Japan to start educating the people about energy.

"It is important for the Japanese to realize that renewable energy can work on a large scale, and that people can make money from it," said Yamamoto, who actively asked questions about Feldheim's 43 wind turbines and the 600 pigs that produce the waste to fuel the biogas plant.

"In order to let the people of Japan know, it is important to be here, to see this," he said, standing beneath a towering wind turbine.

Knape, Feldheim's mayor, said it took about 10 years for residents in the area to come around to the idea of investing in renewable energy. They were truly convinced when they realized that building their own power network would result in a 25 to 30 percent cut in their electricity bills and annual savings of euro100,000 (\$134,180) in energy costs for the farmer's co-op in the village.

The 30 local jobs created through the windpark and the biogas plant provided further proof for Feldheim residents that their decision to rely on renewables, and themselves, was the right one.

"The energy revolution is taking place in the countryside," said Werner Frohwitter, spokesman for Feldheim's energy project. "We have created a whole new perspective for these people."

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