

Japan Cabinet Panel Urges Ending Use of Nuke Power

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese Cabinet panel called Friday for phasing out of nuclear power over the next three decades in a major shift for Japan as it overhauls energy policy following the Fukushima meltdowns.

Adopting the proposals would be a break with Japan's decades-long advocacy of nuclear power. The new energy policy faces opposition from powerful business interests but phasing out nuclear power is popular with the public. It calls for greater reliance on renewable energy, more conservation and sustainable use of fossil fuels and would see Japan joining Germany in turning its back on nuclear energy.

The new policy requires endorsement by the entire Cabinet. Japanese news reports say the Cabinet has already agreed to the changes.

Japan began reviewing its energy policy following last year's disaster at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant, which was set off by a massive earthquake and tsunami. Before the accident, the resource-poor country relied on nuclear power for one-third of its energy and had planned to raise that to 50 percent by 2030.

"Based on facing the reality of this grave accident and by learning lessons from the accident, the government has decided to review the national energy strategy from scratch," said the policy document. "One of the key pillars of the new strategy is to achieve a society that does not depend on nuclear energy as soon as possible," it said.

Growing anti-nuclear sentiment and mass protests made it difficult for the government and plant operators to restart reactors idled for inspections, and by early May all 50 Japanese reactors had gone offline. Imports of oil and gas for electricity generation have surged as a result and Japan's trade balance has swung into deficit.

Officials acknowledge many questions remain unanswered, among them how to pay for the costly expansion of renewable energy and how to minimize the environmental impact of a return to heavier use of natural gas and other fossil fuels.

The phase-out of nuclear power by the 2030s is to be achieved mainly by retiring aging reactors and not replacing them.

The proposed new policy calls for adhering to a 40-year life span for each reactor and for building no more new reactors. It leaves open the possibility of restarting

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reactors before they are eventually phased out, but only if they have passed strict safety tests and won approval by a newly formed regulatory commission.

"We will launch all possible policy measures to achieve a nuclear-free society by the 2030s," it said. "Until the total phase-out we will only use nuclear reactors that are confirmed safe."

The new policy delays a decision on spent fuel processing and radioactive waste disposal, leaving open the questions of how Japan will handle its spent nuclear fuel and avoid accumulating stockpiles of plutonium.

"The road to a nuclear-free society is not easy," it says, forecasting economic growth at a modest rate of 0.8 percent annually under a nuclear-free scenario.

Following Japan's 2011 Fukushima disaster, Germany decided to speed up phasing out its nuclear power plants, shutting them down within a decade and betting on renewable energies instead. Nuclear power had accounted for a little more than 20 percent of Germany's needs but has since fallen well below that level.

Energy experts note that relying more on renewable energy is easier for European countries that can draw on surplus power from neighboring countries when volatile wind and solar power fall short. As an island nation Japan lacks that option.

Still, the new policy calls for Japan to increase use of renewable energy by eight-fold over the 2010 level by 2030.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda allowed two reactors to restart in July to avoid power shortages during the hot summer months. At the time, Noda stressed that the restarts were crucial for Japan's economy and energy needs.

His government faces strong resistance to changes in the nuclear policy from business leaders worried by surging energy costs and from utility operators. Towns hosting the 50 reactors — usually poor, remote fishing villages hungry for subsidies — also have complained of a loss of income and jobs.

The head of Tokyo Electric Power Co., the Japanese utility that owns the tsunami-hit Fukushima nuclear power plant, has said handling last year's meltdowns ate up money the utility might have used to switch to alternative energy.

To encourage investment in and use of green energy, the government has eased restrictions on land use for solar and wind power and relaxed regulations on small hydropower plants and on drilling for geothermal energy in national parks. It also has approved tariffs for producers meant to spur investment by guaranteeing higher returns for renewable than for conventional energy.

But daunting obstacles remain, including a power grid ill-suited to accommodating volatile solar and wind energy and steep upfront costs for building solar or geothermal plants.

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