Japan Nuke Plant Progressing in Fuel Removal Plans

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OKUMA, Japan (AP) — The operator of Japan's tsunami-ravaged nuclear power plant said Wednesday that work was steadily progressing in its plans to remove fuel rods from a cooling pool at the center of international concerns.

The Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant suffered meltdowns at three reactors as a result of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Hydrogen explosions at another of the plant's reactors, Unit 4, damaged a reactor building and a cooling pool, raising concerns in Japan and other countries, including the United States.

Despite repeated reassurances by the plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co., and government officials about the safety of the Unit 4 building following structural reinforcement, the cooling pool has caused uneasiness among a public wary of the consequences of another major earthquake.

Experts have said the fuel inside the pool, which is not enclosed and sits on the highest floor of the building, should be relocated quickly. A power loss similar to the one during the 2011 disaster could cause the fuel inside the pool to dry up, overheat and possibly cause even worse radiation leaks, they say.

The plant's manager, Takeshi Takahashi, told journalists Wednesday during a tour of the plant that the removal of the fuel rods will begin in November and take a year to complete. It will be the first major step in a decades-long cleanup of the plant.

"We are steadily making progress, one step at a time," Takahashi said.

Even though the Unit 4 reactor building has performed well in tests of its quake resistance, it would be best to move fuel from the pool to a safer storage area, he said.

Work was visibly in progress around Unit 4 during the plant tour. A special structure designed to remove fuel rods from the pool is being built next to Unit 4 reactor building.

TEPCO also plans to remove melted fuel from the wrecked reactors within 10 years, but full decommissioning of the plant is expected to take decades.

TEPCO officials said Wednesday that all of the fuel rods will be moved to a joint cooling pool inside a nearby lower building, considered a safer storage option. To make room for the incoming fuel, thousands of fuel rods will be moved from the joint pool for storage in even safer dry casks.

Work related to the moving of the fuel rods was seen Wednesday throughout the plant. At the joint pool, workers were examining the fuel to be placed into dry storage.

Takahashi said it would be a "significantly long process" of about 30-40 years until the plant is fully decommissioned, a process that will require the safe removal of melted debris from the three wrecked reactors.

Among the most visible of the challenges facing the plant is its struggle with

contaminated water leaking from reactors.

About 260,000 tons of highly radioactive water is being stored in some 900 gigantic tanks. They are visible even at the plant's entrance and built around the compound, taking up more than 80 percent of its storage capacity.

TEPCO expects the amount to double over three years and plans to build hundreds of more tanks by mid-2015 to meet the demand. The water keeps swelling and the land space is limited.

So TEPCO is anxious to launch a new water treatment system that can purify the contaminated water and eventually release it into the ocean as a last-ditch measure in case of a lack of storage space.

The machine, called ALPS, however, still needs approval by government regulators ahead of a final test run, and TEPCO says it has no immediate plans to release the water into the ocean.

The meltdowns have caused the plant to release radiation into the surrounding air, soil and ocean and displaced about 160,000 people from around the plant. They are uncertain when or if they will be able to return home.

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