

Japan Gov't to Help Stop Radioactive Water Leaks

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TOKYO (AP) — Japan's government said Wednesday that it would step in and take "firm measures" to tackle contaminated water leaks at the country's crippled nuclear plant, including possibly funding a multibillion-dollar project to fix the problem.

The announcement came a day after the operator of the wrecked Fukushima Dai-ichi plant said some of the water was seeping over or around an underground barrier it created after injecting chemicals into the soil that solidified into a wall.

"There is heightened concern among the public, particularly about the contaminated water problem," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Wednesday during a government nuclear disaster response meeting at his office. "This is an urgent matter that needs to be addressed. The government will step in to take firm measures."

The latest problem involves underground water that has built up over the last month since the operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co., began creating the chemical walls underground to stop leaks after detecting radiation spikes in water samples in May.

Government officials said Wednesday that an estimated 300 tons of contaminated water has been leaking into the sea each day since early in the crisis, which was caused by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. That's about half of the underground water that escapes into the sea every day.

Since a major leak via a maintenance pit a month after three Fukushima reactors went into meltdown following the disasters, TEPCO had denied any further leaks into the sea until acknowledging them last month, despite repeated warnings by experts.

The underground barrier on the coastal embankment has somewhat slowed the leaks, but has caused underground water to swell at the complex. To prevent an overflow above the surface, which is feared to happen within weeks, TEPCO will start pumping out about 100 tons of underground water from coastal observation wells by the end of this week.

Government officials said Wednesday that they were considering funding a separate, multibillion-dollar project to surround the reactor buildings with a wall of frozen ground to block underground water from entering the buildings.

The same method has been used to build tunnels, but building a wall that surrounds four reactor buildings and their related facilities is "unprecedented anywhere in the world," said Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga. "We believe it is necessary

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

that the country steps forward to support its construction," he said.

Tatsuya Shinkawa, an official at the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, said government officials were discussing funding details for the frozen ground wall project, which is expected to cost "several tens of billions of yen" (several billions of dollars) to construct.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/29/2015 - 2:22pm):

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