

TEPCO Seeks More Restarts Of Japanese Reactors

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Tokyo Electric Power Co. has requested that safety inspections be carried out to allow for restarting two nuclear reactors, despite concerns over how it has handled the catastrophe at the Fukushima plant. All of Japan's 50 nuclear reactors are offline while regulators consider restarts under safety rules revised after the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami caused meltdowns at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi plant. Restarts will require approvals from the Nuclear Regulation Authority and local governments.

The request to restart two reactors at Kashiwazaki-Kariwa, in Niigata Prefecture on the Japan Sea coast, brings to 14 the number of reactors that utilities want assessed. Located 200 kilometers (125 miles) northwest of Tokyo, the plant is the world's largest atomic power plant, whose seven reactors have a combined output capacity of 8.2 million kilowatts. TEPCO is seeking restarts of reactor Nos. 6 and 7, advanced boiling water reactors that are the newest at the plant. The plant suffered a long list of radioactive leaks and malfunctions during from a magnitude 6.8 quake on July 16, 2007, but underwent repairs and tests after that.

TEPCO and other utilities are eager to restart at least some of the country's 50 operable reactors to help defray rising costs both from maintaining the nuclear plants and also from increased imports of gas and oil for conventional power plants needed to offset lost generating capacity. The request comes as a parliamentary panel questions TEPCO's president, Naomi Hirose, on Friday over the company's handling of the accident, as radiation leaks and other troubles persist. Opposition lawmakers of the lower house grilled Hirose over a decision by TEPCO to delay use of measures now being considered to prevent radiation-tainted water from escaping into groundwater and the sea.

"You knew of this radioactive water problem more than two years ago," Masato Imai of the Democratic Party of Japan, which was in power at the time of the accident, told Hirose. "It appears your risk awareness was way too low," he said. "Why did you not act then?"

While apologizing repeatedly for the leaks and other mishaps at the plant, Hirose said that the heaps of rubble and other waste from the tsunami and explosions at the plant, and high levels of radiation, prevented some work from being done. Worries over cost and feasibility also have slowed progress on stabilizing the situation at the plant, he said. Meanwhile, the water continues to accumulate as TEPCO struggles to keep the damaged reactors cool and prevent further meltdowns. "The water is unable to escape, but it is still accumulating. It is a very difficult situation," Hirose said.

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"It's really a 'whack-a-mole' situation," he said, pledging to "do what needs doing" and avoid delays and failures in the future. Post-Fukushima worries over disaster preparedness prompted the government to revise safety requirements for all nuclear plants. Information from TEPCO about its application for the Niigata plants includes details about its ability to withstand earthquakes, tsunami, tornados and volcanic eruptions.

Before the 2011 disaster, the Fukushima plant was deemed earthquake and tsunami-safe, but the wall of water that hit the coast crippled emergency generators used to run cooling systems, allowing several reactors to overheat and melt down.

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