

Japan: Uncertainty shrouds storage facilities for radioactive waste in Fukushima

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FUKUSHIMA — Two years after the onset of the disaster at Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant, bags of radioactive waste continue to sit on private land and at temporary storage sites here due to a lack of interim storage facilities that are supposed to store the waste for up to three decades.

The Ministry of the Environment is set to unveil plans for the construction of interim storage facilities as early as this month, but before construction can begin, officials must gain consent not only from local bodies but also from landowners who have evacuated to other areas. As the situation stands, it remains unclear whether the government can start moving the waste into storage in January 2015 as planned.

In the Watari district of Fukushima, large bags filled with contaminated soil and other waste sit covered with a waterproof sheet at the home of 57-year-old resident Hidenori Sato. The radiation dosage at the entrance of his home is as high as 0.4 to 0.5 microsieverts per hour, far above the government-permitted limit of 0.23 microsieverts per hour (1 millisievert per year). Decontamination of about 6,000 buildings began in the district last spring, but there is nowhere to take the waste that is produced as an offshoot of the work. In late September workers came and placed a new waterproof sheet over the waste.

"So it's going to be here a while then," Sato sighed.

The Ministry of the Environment estimates that a massive 18.7 million to 28.15 million cubic meters of radiation-tainted waste will be produced as a result of decontamination work within Fukushima Prefecture. In August 2012, officials listed up candidate sites to accommodate waste storage facilities in three municipalities where nuclear facilities currently stand, and sought permission to conduct local surveys. The municipalities of Naraha and Okuma agreed to the surveys in November last year, and drilling began this spring, after which officials judged it was possible to build storage facilities. The mayor of Futaba at the time voiced opposition to the idea, but resigned in February this year. The current mayor, Shiro Izawa, met with Senior Vice Environment Minister Shinji Inoue on Sept. 27 and told him that his town would allow the surveys to go ahead.

The ministry plans to draw up concrete plans for the interim storage facilities and propose locations to build them as early as this month. It aims to begin construction next fiscal year, and include construction expenses in next fiscal year's initial budget, which is to be compiled in December. However, before construction can commence, officials will need to overcome the hurdle of obtaining consent from local bodies.

Yukiei Matsumoto, the mayor of Naraha, has refused to accept highly contaminated soil from other municipalities, and has gone no further than calling for a "storage structure" for waste with radioactivity levels not exceeding 100,000 becquerels per kilogram. He has stated that he will seek the opinion of residents once a clear picture of the storage facility has been presented. The priorities for Matsumoto are measures to stimulate the municipality and negotiations on compensation and

other issues.

Okuma Mayor Toshitsuna Watanabe, meanwhile, has taken a cautious approach, saying, "I'd like to hear residents' opinions in a briefing attended by a small number of people, and make a decision together with the town assembly."

In the towns of Okuma and Futaba, residents have generally been accepting of the plans, as large portions of the municipalities are already zoned as areas where return will remain difficult for a long time (areas where radiation levels reach 50 millisieverts per year or more). In February this year, about 50 residents from the Shinsan district of Futaba, which is a candidate for housing an interim storage facility, penned a memorandum stating that they would cooperate with a survey, even though they considered the area one they had become attached to over several generations.

District head Takashi Takehara, 78, commented, "Mountains of contaminated soil have built up in various areas of the prefecture, but there's nowhere to take it besides Futaba. The young people who would've taken over the town in the future are starting new lives in other areas where they have evacuated. If we can get compensation, it could help elderly people rebuild their lives."

Residents of the town of Naraha don't necessarily share the same feelings. Last summer the government zoned the town as an area preparing for the lifting of evacuation orders — a designation applied to zones where radiation dosages stand at no more than 20 millisieverts per year — meaning that residents can expect to return in the future. Town administration meetings in Naraha have been flooded with questions from people asking why a storage facility for radioactive waste would be built in a town to which they could return. At the same time officials received a comment that it would be hard not to accept waste from other areas that had helped residents while they were evacuated.

In any case, if construction of temporary storage facilities does not move forward, then officials will not be able to decide on the extent of decontamination work and how long the work should continue.

Last summer Okuma official Jin Kowata, 63, handed the Ministry of the Environment a petition signed by about 1,700 residents — over 10 percent of the town's population — calling for the government to purchase land and construct a waste storage facility.

"I imagine they don't need to decontaminate areas where they're going to build a storage facility. Restoration funds should go to residents who have been burdened with double loans," he said.

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<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20131007p2a00m0na015000c.html>

Fukushima village agrees to host temporary incinerator for radioactive waste

The nuclear disaster-hit village of Iitate in Fukushima Prefecture has agreed to host a temporary incinerator to compress radioactive waste emanating from the disaster.

The village, which has been entirely evacuated due to the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant crisis, and the Ministry of the Environment reached an agreement to construct the makeshift incinerator on Oct. 9. The facility will accept radioactive waste — including tainted rice straw — not

only from Iitate but also from the city of Fukushima and five other municipalities in the prefecture. It is set to become the first such facility to aggregate radioactive waste from outside municipalities.

The incinerator will be accompanied by a temporary experimental facility to turn burned ash and contaminated soil into materials for construction and other purposes by separating radioactive cesium from them. Authorities are seeking to complete the construction of the facilities by the end of fiscal 2014.

The planned construction site is currently uninhabited as it is located in a “residency restriction zone” due to the nuclear disaster. The facility will in principle be operated for three years. Incinerated ash that couldn’t be turned into construction and other materials will be temporarily stored in concrete boxes before being transported to an interim storage facility.

At a press conference in the city of Fukushima, Iitate Mayor Norio Kanno said, “We will aim to reduce the amount (of radioactive waste) as much as possible before transferring it to an interim storage facility.” As to the plan for the facility to accept 30 percent of all radioactive waste generated in six other municipalities, Kanno said, “It is based on the idea of ‘mutual assistance,’ in which we do what we can.”

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<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20131010p2a00m0na003000c.html>
