

# Local concerns could delay nuclear operations throughout Japan

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Municipalities hosting nuclear power plants are now so nervous about potential accidents that 42 of Japan's 54 commercial reactors could be offline during the peak electricity demand period this summer.

That situation could lead to power outages spreading throughout Japan.

Electric power companies are not legally bound to gain the approval of local communities before resuming reactor operations. However, the companies have signed safety agreements with prefectural and municipal governments that make it difficult to resume operations without their consent.

Considering the protracted problems at the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, local governments are now opposing such plans.

In a May 4 meeting with industry minister Banri Kaieda, Fukui Governor Issei Nishikawa said, "I will not approve the resumption of operations unless safety standards that the prefectural government has asked for are presented."

Fukui Prefecture has 13 commercial nuclear plants, the most in the nation. Operations at six have been suspended for inspections and three others will halt operations for inspections in July.

Eight reactors in Fukui Prefecture have been operating for more than 30 years. The prefectural government has asked the central government for measures to deal with such old reactors.

Regular inspections are required at nuclear reactors about once a year. Operations of 14 reactors have been halted for such inspections. Seven were scheduled to restart by late April, but electric power companies have yet to pull the switch.

Six other reactors are scheduled to undergo regular inspections by this summer. And 15 reactors are not operating because they were damaged by the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake.

If the 42 reactors are shut down in the summer, it would deprive Japan of about 20 percent of total electricity now generated.

One reason for the delay in resuming operations is that the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) has asked for emergency safety measures in light of the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 plant.

Kyushu Electric Power Co. officials have pointed to the failure to stabilize the Fukushima accident as another factor behind the delay in resuming operations.

NISA officials have already cleared short-term measures taken at various reactors, such as the deployment of emergency generator vehicles.

Although the central government has asked Chubu Electric Power Co. to shut down all reactors at the Hamaoka nuclear plant in Shizuoka Prefecture to strengthen anti-tsunami measures, it has also indicated that it would not seek the shutdown of other reactors.

But the continuing problems at the Fukushima plant and the inability of the central government to present comprehensive measures to deal with nuclear plant safety have made it more difficult for electric power companies to gain the understanding of local communities where other nuclear plants are located.

Some electric power companies are stepping up measures to win over the residents.

Shikoku Electric Power Co. officials personally visit about 21,000 households in the vicinity of the Ikata nuclear plant every autumn to gain their understanding for the plant's operations. This year, those visits will start from May 11, and the area to be covered has been expanded to a 20-kilometer radius of the plant.

Power shortages in the summer were already feared after Kan sought the shutdown of the Hamaoka plant.

Chubu Electric, which decided to go along with Kan's request, has said it would stop providing electricity to Tokyo Electric Power Co., operator of the Fukushima plant.

Kyushu Electric Power officials have also said shortages of between 20 and 25 percent were likely this August, when electricity demand peaks, if its Genkai plant cannot resume operations.

But local governments have continued to express concerns about the safety of nuclear plants in their backyards.

Hiroshi Aida, mayor of Kashiwazaki in Niigata Prefecture, said he would ask the central government for its opinion on the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant's safety based on the request to halt operations at the Hamaoka plant.

The seven reactors at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant were shut down following greater-than-expected damage from the Niigata Chuetsu-oki Earthquake in 2007. TEPCO resumed operations at four reactors after anti-quake measures were strengthened.

In a news conference in April, Aida indicated he would not agree to the resumption of operations at the other three reactors of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant.

"There will be a need to look at the safety measures that are taken after the situation at the Fukushima plant is settled," Aida said. "We absolutely have to avoid having our residents face the same problems that those in Fukushima are facing."

Two of the reactors now operating are scheduled for regular inspections in August.

Niigata Governor Hirohiko Izumida also indicated that he wanted the central government to more closely examine what occurred at Fukushima.

"Because an explosion occurred in the building of a reactor that was not operating, there are doubts as to whether even reactors that are not operating can be called safe," Izumida said.

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