

Japan to set up new nuclear watchdog

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The existing Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) has been criticised following the March 11 disaster for failing to police the industry strictly and therefore increasing the risk of safety lapses.

NISA is part of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which actively promotes nuclear power and the export of Japanese [reactor technology](#).

The new agency under the environment ministry, which will have several hundred officials and may be called the Nuclear Safety Agency, is expected to be up and running by April.

Japan's massive quake and tsunami five months ago crippled the coastal Fukushima Daiichi plant, sparking a series of meltdowns, explosions and the ongoing release of radiation into the environment.

Centre-left Prime Minister Naoto Kan has advocated a gradual phasing out of nuclear power in the quake-prone volcanic island nation, which previously used [atomic power](#) for about 30 percent of its energy needs.

Last week the government fired three top nuclear officials over their handling of the radiation crisis, which sparked mass evacuations and led to the contamination of foodstuffs including tea, vegetables, milk and beef.

More than two-thirds of Japan's 54 reactors are now offline and undergoing safety checks, with their restarts dependent on approval from host communities, many of which are now deeply skeptical about nuclear safety.

NISA has come under fire for its cozy ties with the industry and the body has attracted additional criticism for seeking to swing popular opinion by planting pro-nuclear questions at public forums.

Cabinet members agreed Friday to set up the new body under the environment agency, ahead of a formal announcement Monday, Kyodo News agency reported.

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