

# Japan formally OKs new nuclear safety requirements (Update 2)

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In this Saturday, July. 23, 2011 file photo, the No. 3 reactor, right, of the Ikata nuclear power plant, operated by Shikoku Electric Power Co., is seen in Ikata, western Japan. Japan's nuclear watchdog has formally approved new safety requirements for atomic plants, paving the way for the reopening of facilities shut down since the Fukushima disaster. The new requirements approved Wednesday, July 19, 2013, by the Nuclear Regulation Authority will take effect on July 8, when operators will be able to apply for inspections. If plants pass inspection, they can reopen. Shikoku Electric Power Co. is expected to apply for the reopening of Ikata's No. 3 reactor. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File)

Japan's nuclear watchdog formally approved a set of new safety

requirements for atomic power plants on Wednesday, paving the way for the reopening of facilities shut down since the Fukushima disaster in a move critics charged was too hasty.

The new requirements approved by the Nuclear Regulation Authority take effect July 8, when operators will be able to apply for inspections. If plants pass the inspections, a process expected to take several months, they will be able to reopen later this year or early next year.

All but two of Japan's 50 reactors have been offline since a March 2011 earthquake and tsunami triggered multiple meltdowns and massive radiation leaks at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant, about 250 kilometers (160 miles) northeast of Tokyo. The plant currently relies on a precarious makeshift cooling system and is struggling with large amounts of radioactive water leaking out of its broken reactors and other problems.

Plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. revealed on Wednesday that high levels of radioactive strontium and tritium were found in a sample of groundwater from the ocean side of the No. 2 turbine building. The levels in the sample, taken in May, were up to 30 times higher than the limit for release into the ocean, TEPCO spokesman Toshihiko Fukuda said.

He said there was no sign that the contaminated groundwater had leaked into sea, citing no abnormal increase in ocean radioactivity. However, the delay in the announcement prompted an immediate warning from the nuclear watchdog.

Wednesday's decision setting the launch date for the new safety requirements came nearly two weeks ahead of the legal deadline, prompting critics to suspect industrial and political pressure so that utilities can restart their reactors as quickly as possible.

Many utilities have complained about soaring fuel costs for running conventional thermal power plants needed to make up for power shortfalls caused by idle nuclear plants. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's pro-industry government has quickly reversed a nuclear phase-out plan since taking office last December, saying nuclear energy is key to Japan's economy.



In this Thursday, Jan. 26, 2012 file photo, the No. 3, right, and No. 4 reactors of Ohi nuclear power plant, operated by Kansai Electric Power Co., stand in Ohi, Fukui prefecture, north of Tokyo. Japan's nuclear watchdog has formally approved new safety requirements for atomic plants, paving the way for the reopening of facilities shut down since the Fukushima disaster. The new requirements approved Wednesday, June 19, 2013 by the Nuclear Regulation Authority will take effect on July 8, when operators will be able to apply for inspections. If plants pass inspection, they can reopen. Kansai Electric Power Co. is expected to apply for the reopening of Ohi's No. 3 and No. 4 reactors. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi, File)

The critics say the new requirements still have loopholes that make things easier for operators, including a five-year grace period for installing some mandated new equipment. They also say the approvals only concern resuming reactor operations, while nearby communities lag in enacting needed emergency and evacuation procedures.

"Obviously it's a product of rushed work just to make it in time," said Hiromitsu Ino, a nuclear expert and professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo. "If the new requirement is primarily to prevent another Fukushima disaster, they should have waited until they find more about what happened and learn all the lessons."

Watchdog officials denied any outside influence.

The new requirements specify for the first time that plants must take steps to guard against radiation leaks in the case of severe accidents, install emergency command centers and enact anti-terrorist measures. Operators are also required to upgrade their protection against tsunamis and earthquakes.

Safety was previously left up to the operators, relying on their self-interest in protecting their own investments as an incentive for implementing adequate measures. Tokyo Electric Power Co. came under harsh criticism for underestimating the risk of tsunami and building a seawall that was less than half the height of the wave that hit the plant two years ago.

Makoto Yagi, the president of Kansai Electric Power Co. and chairman of the powerful Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan lobby, urged the watchdog to promptly finish the inspections to minimize delays.

"We've been already making necessary preparations and plan to file for

screening as soon as we're ready," he said in a statement.

Watchdog chairman Shunichi Tanaka said the endorsement of the new safety requirements is a turning point for nuclear regulation in Japan, but is only a start.

"I think we now have a framework that is up to international standards. What's more important is whether we can put the spirit in it during the inspection process," he said. The agency is currently conducting probes at several plants to review past investigations that might have overlooked potential problems.

Tanaka said Japan needs to build a stronger safety culture so that utilities view safety upgrades as a benefit rather than a burden.

"I hope someday operators see that safety improvement is for their own interest and helps their business," he said.

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