

Japan doubles cost estimate for Fukushima cleanup

December 9 2016, by Mari Yamaguchi



In this Feb. 10, 2016 file photo, a member of the media tour group wearing a protective suit and a mask looks at the No. 3 reactor building at Tokyo Electric Power Co's (TEPCO) tsunami-crippled Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant in Okuma, Fukushima Prefecture, northeastern Japan, one month before Japan marks the fifth anniversary of a devastating earthquake and tsunami that left nearly 19,000 people dead or missing, turned coastal communities into wasteland and triggered a nuclear crisis. A cost estimate to clean up Japan's wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant has doubled to nearly 22 trillion yen (\$190 billion), with decommissioning costs expected to continue to rise, according to a government panel Friday, Dec. 9, 2016. (Toru Hanai/Pool Photo via AP, File)

The estimated cost of cleaning up Japan's wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant has doubled to nearly 22 trillion yen (\$190 billion), with decommissioning expenses expected to continue to increase, a government panel said Friday.

The estimate raises the decommissioning part of the total costs to 8 trillion yen (\$70 billion) from the current 2 trillion (\$17.5 billion) because of surging labor and construction expenses. Panel officials said the numbers could still grow as experts learn more about the damage to the plant's reactors and determine fuel removal methods.

Costs for compensation, decontamination of the area and waste storage have also grown significantly.

The plant suffered multiple meltdowns following a massive March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Officials say its decommissioning will take several decades.

Rising cost estimates mean an increased burden on consumers.

Kunio Ito, a Hitotsubashi University professor of commerce who heads the panel, said it is inevitable that the plant operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co., or TEPCO, will pass on to customers part of the costs.

He said the cost estimate for decommissioning is sketchy, but is needed to show the public how much the national project will roughly cost. The estimated increase of 6 trillion yen (\$53 billion) is modeled after the example of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant cleanup in Pennsylvania following its 1979 partial meltdown.



In this Feb. 10, 2016 file photo, a worker, wearing a protective suit and a mask, levels ground at the tsunami-crippled Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant, operated by Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO), in Okuma, Fukushima Prefecture, northeastern Japan, one month before Japan marks the fifth anniversary of a devastating earthquake and tsunami that left nearly 19,000 people dead or missing, turned coastal communities into wasteland and triggered a nuclear crisis. A cost estimate to clean up Japan's wrecked Fukushima nuclear plant has doubled to nearly 22 trillion yen (\$190 billion), with decommissioning costs expected to continue to rise, according to a government panel Friday, Dec. 9, 2016. (Toru Hanai/Pool Photo via AP, File)

The TMI cleanup took five years and nearly \$1 billion to remove 136 tons of melted fuel from one reactor. The Fukushima plant has twice as much melted fuel in each of three damaged reactors, meaning six times as much melted fuel must to be removed, the government-funded decommissioning and compensation organization said. It came up with the figure of \$53 billion by factoring in the more extensive development

of robotics and other equipment needed at Fukushima. The estimate does not include the cost of final waste management.

The panel has been discussing ways to keep TEPCO alive so it can cover the cost that it is responsible for. TEPCO has already received a government bailout, and the panel urged Fukushima cleanup-related operations to effectively stay under state control until the next review in 2019.

The 10-member panel commissioned by the Trade and Industry Ministry plans to urge TEPCO to conduct a drastic restructuring and reforms, possibly with a new business alliance with companies in and outside Japan, to stay afloat. The panel will submit its recommendations in a final report to Trade and Industry Minister Hiroshige Seko later this month.

"This is a chance for innovation and cost-cutting to push forward Fukushima's reconstruction," Seko told reporters. "We expect TEPCO to fulfill its responsibility."

TEPCO President Naomi Hirose, who was summoned to parliament Friday, pledged to live up to expectations.

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