

IAEA urges Japan to take ample time in Fukushima cleanup

January 31 2019, by Mari Yamaguchi

The International Atomic Energy Agency urged Japan on Thursday to spend ample time in developing a decommissioning plan for the tsunami-damaged Fukushima nuclear power plant and to be honest with the public about remaining uncertainties.

In a report based on a visit by an IAEA team to the plant in November, the agency urged the operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co., to secure adequate space and finish plans for managing highly radioactive melted fuel before starting to remove it from the three damaged reactors.

The cores of the three reactors melted after a massive 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Utility and government officials plan to start removing the melted fuel in 2021, but still know little about its condition and have not finalized waste management plans.

"The IAEA review team advises that before the commencement of the fuel debris retrieval activities, there should be a clear implementation plan defined to safely manage the retrieved material," the report said. "TEPCO should ensure that appropriate containers and storage capacity are available before starting the fuel debris retrieval."

The report also urged the government and TEPCO to carefully consider ways to express "the inherent uncertainties involved" in the project and develop "a credible plan" for the long term. It advised TEPCO to consider adopting contingency plans to "accommodate any schedule delays."

Dale Klein, a former U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission chairman who heads a TEPCO reform committee, said in a recent interview that the decommissioning should not be rushed, even if the government and TEPCO have set a schedule and people want to see it move faster.

"It's much better to do it right than do it fast," he said, adding that it's also good not to rush from a health and safety perspective. "Clearly, the longer you wait, the less the radiation is."

He said he would be "astounded" if the current schedule ends up unchanged.

In order to make room in the plant compound to safely store the melted fuel and for other needed facilities, about 1 million tons of radioactive waste water currently stored in hundreds of tanks will have to be removed. The IAEA team, headed by Xerri Christoph, an expert on radioactive waste, urged the government and TEPCO to urgently decide how to dispose of it.

Nuclear experts, including officials at the IAEA and Japanese Nuclear Regulation Authority, have said a controlled release of the water into the Pacific Ocean is the only realistic option. A release, however, is unlikely until after the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in order to avoid concerns among visitors from overseas.

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Citation: IAEA urges Japan to take ample time in Fukushima cleanup (2019, January 31)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2019-01-iaea-urges-japan-ample-fukushima.html>

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