

TEPCO reports new leaks at Fukushima reactor

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Last week the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) admitted that one of the makeshift storage tanks it uses to hold contaminated water at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant had leaked 300 tons (more than 70,000 gallons) of highly radioactive water over a period of weeks. This latest threat to public health comes after revelations that radioactive water from underground storage tanks and groundwater has leaked into the ocean, and that TEPCO misled government agencies about exposures suffered by cleanup workers.

On Monday, Japanese Trade and Industry Minister Toshimitsu Motegi appeared at Fukushima in an attempt at damage control.

"I strongly feel that the government should get fully involved," Motegi told the press. This comes after more than two years during which the government left TEPCO in charge of the cleanup, knowing full well the company's long history of falsified data and safety checks. Motegi recommended that TEPCO—to which the government has provided hundreds of billions of yen in aid since the 2011 earthquake—should better document its inspections and use welded water tanks instead of weak, bolted tanks.

One of the weaker tanks is responsible for the latest leak. It holds approximately 1,000 tons of water, and has been leaking water at a rate of about ten tons per day. Of the 1,000 or so storage tanks erected on-site, approximately 350 are bolted together, with the seams inadequately sealed by plastic packing materials.

TEPCO is filling the tanks at a rate of about one every 2 1/2 days to keep up with the volume of water used to cool Fukushima's crippled reactors and fuel rods. It does not yet have functioning filters for removing radioactive chemicals from the water. Large volumes of cooling water are needed everyday because the closed loop used to cool the boiled water reactors during normal operations was destroyed by the March 2011 tsunami and subsequent

explosions at the plant.

The French daily *Le Monde* has reported that puddles near the leaking tank yielded an exposure of more than 100 millisieverts per hour; under Japanese law, workers should not be exposed to more than 100 mSv over a 5-year period. 100 mSv per hour for ten straight hours would result in radiation sickness, including nausea and a drop in the victim's white blood cell count. *National Geographic* reported that the water leaking from the tank contains high levels of strontium-90 and cesium-137. In July, levels of these elements measured in wells inside the plant increased 15-fold. TEPCO has been unable to explain that increase, and has not found the leak. Instead, it has promised to run a pump should rain mix with the leaking water.

Strontium-90 that leaks into the ocean will accumulate in the bones of fish, and does the same in the bones of people who ingest contaminated seafood. According to the Kyodo press agency, commercial fishermen will stop taking fish from the waters around Fukushima starting September 1.

After the March 2011 Tsunami, cesium-137 was found as far away as Tokyo, 160 miles from the plant. Reporting in October 2011 on localized radioactive "hot spots" found in the capital, the *New York Times* noted that 22 of the spots were giving off 37,000 becquerels of radiation per square meter, similar to levels in contaminated areas around Chernobyl. A Tokyo city official responded to the reports by proclaiming that "nobody eats dirt."

On July 5 of this year, the Industrial Health Division of the Japanese government's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare released a "re-evaluation" of the radiation dosages suffered by emergency workers at Fukushima. The re-evaluation was prompted by the fact that subcontractors were reporting different dosages than TEPCO itself. The U.N. Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation has also reviewed TEPCO's

numbers and found them inaccurate.

Of the cases reviewed, TEPCO had reported inaccurately low dosages for 431 workers, while only 19 cases had to be revised upward. Of the 431 adjusted upward, 12 resulted in estimates that the worker had suffered exposure in the range of 50 to 100 millisieverts. Six others—three employed by TEPCO, the other three by contractors—had suffered dosages greater than 100 mSv.

According to TEPCO's figures, this increase means that a total of 173 workers have suffered dosages above 100 mSv. However, this number includes only those whose thyroid glands were exposed to that level from radioactive iodine. When total body exposure is included, nearly 2,000 workers suffered radiation at levels above 100 mSv.

In March 2013, the French daily *Liberation* reported that six TEPCO workers received dosages higher than 250 mSv, with one as high as 678.8.

In cases where exposure results from radioactive iodine in a person's thyroid, tumors are likely to result. But cleanup workers have complained to the news web site *The Asahi Shimbun* that TEPCO never gave them a careful explanation of the health risks.

TEPCO, it would seem, was too busy cutting costs. In its annual report for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2012, it vowed to cut ¥1,275.8 billion (\$12.76 billion) of personnel costs as part of its recovery from the Fukushima disaster. These cuts were to be taken from staffing levels, pensions, other benefits, and a 20% pay cut. As of March 3, 2012, TEPCO had 52,046 employees. Within a year, more than 5,000 had left. Of this number, nearly 1,200 were "voluntary resignations," according to *Bloomberg News*. While showing no mercy to its workers, TEPCO had no qualms about seeking largesse from the Japanese government. As of July of this year—before the latest leaks were revealed—it had already made eighteen requests for government financial assistance.



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