

Editorial

Daiichi nuclear power plant (radioactivity) : Japan needs to come clean on disposal of Fukushima water

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Plans to dump more than 1 million tonnes of treated fluid from destroyed nuclear plant in sea has caused an outcry in both China and South Korea, and greater transparency is called for.



People rally in front of the prime minister's office in Tokyo this month against the Japanese government's decision to release treated radioactive water from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the sea. Photo : Kyodo

Trust is as essential as water for the operation of a nuclear plant. The lack of faith in the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco), the owner of the destroyed Fukushima Daiichi facility, is why there has been an outcry over plans to dump more than

1 million tonnes of treated fluid that had been contaminated off Japan's northeast coast. Authorities have the backing of some scientists and the watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency, but a lack of openness in the past has eroded confidence in the decision.

Transparency will only partly allay concerns ; there also has to be consultation with neighbouring countries and independent, third-party, monitoring.

A decade ago, Japan's most powerful earthquake triggered a giant tsunami that swamped the plant, causing the meltdown of three of its reactors. Water that has come into contact with the melted nuclear fuel is being held in storage tanks.

Video : South Korea aims to fight Japan's Fukushima decision in world tribunal

But they will be full by the middle of next year and with a lack of space to build more, Tepco wants to treat and dilute the fluid so that it can be released into the nearby sea. It claims that after treating, radiation levels will be lower than for drinking water.

But one radioactive element, tritium, cannot be removed. Tepco contends that after purification, it

will remain in the water at levels not harmful to human health or the environment. The company has not helped its cause by failing to be as open about safety as it should have been.

In 2013, it admitted contaminated water had been leaking into the sea and that it had withheld the information from the public until confirming there was a problem, and five years later it acknowledged it had not been filtering out all harmful material.

China raises 'deep concerns' over Japan's plan to release Fukushima plant water into ocean
12 Apr 2021

Even more damaging to trust, though, was the investigation into the Fukushima disaster, Japan's worst nuclear accident.

It determined the meltdown could have been avoided, the root causes being lax regulatory oversight and an ineffective safety culture at Tepco. A particular criticism was the extent of collusion between authorities, regulators and Tepco.

The government's announcement of the release of the tritium-tainted water into the sea, even over a planned period of several decades starting in two years, is hardly comforting.

Video : Japan's plan to release radioactive water from Fukushima nuclear plant into sea sparks outrage

Authorities have not backed their decision with public release of sufficient scientific research and data. They have failed to adequately consult stakeholders, including the local fishing industry. But the impact could be far wider, as evidenced by the criticism from China and South Korea, which share the waters.

The foreign ministry has rightly called Tokyo's decision "extremely irresponsible". It is not too late for greater openness and transparency. Ensuring independent oversight of the removal of the water will create confidence.

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P.-S.

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