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NATIONAL

Tepco now admits radioactive water entering the sea at Fukushima No. 1

Fisheries exec shocked by utility's flip-flop on groundwater's flow

AFP-JIJI

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Fukushima nuclear plant operator Tepco on Monday admitted for the first time that radioactive groundwater is flowing into the sea, fueling fears that marine life is being poisoned.

The admission came a day after voters handed the largely pro-nuclear Liberal Democratic Party of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe — and ally New Komeito — a handsome majority in the Upper House.

Earlier this month, Tokyo Electric Power Co. said groundwater samples taken at the battered plant showed that levels of cesium-134 had shot up more than 110 times in a few days.

Although unable to explain the increased readings, Tepco had nevertheless maintained the toxic groundwater was likely being contained, largely by concrete foundations and steel sheets.

“But now we believe that contaminated water has flowed out to the sea,” a Tepco spokesman said Monday.

However, the spokesman insisted the impact of the radioactive water on the ocean would be limited. “Seawater data have shown no abnormal rise in the levels of radioactivity.”

Tetsu Nozaki, chairman of Fukushima Prefectural Federation of Fisheries Co-operative Associations, voiced deep concern.

“It was quite shocking,” he told NHK. “(Tepco’s) explanation is totally different from the one in the past.”

Fishing around the Fukushima plant was halted shortly after the crisis, and production of beef, milk, mushrooms and vegetables was banned in surrounding areas, crippling the

prefecture's thriving fishing and agriculture industries.

Tepco, which is surviving thanks to a massive infusion of public funds, said it would step up efforts to reduce underground water by consolidating soil near its harbor.

Radioactive substances released by the reactor core meltdowns at the aging plant following the huge quake and tsunami of March 2011 have been leaking from damaged buildings and mingling with the ground water, which usually flows out to sea.

Environmental experts warn that the festering radioactive sore could contaminate the food chain by tainting marine life and ultimately, the humans who eat it.

Tepco said earlier this year that a fish found with radiation more than 2,500 times the legal limit had been caught in a port on Fukushima No. 1's premises. It also said last week that around 2,000 people who worked at the plant now face a heightened risk of thyroid cancer.

This is 10 times more than Tepco's previous estimate for potential thyroid cancer victims and came after the beleaguered utility was told its figures were too conservative.

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