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Associated Press

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by Associated Press

TOKYO -- It was supposed to help revive Japan's troubled nuclear program -- and curb the country's heavy reliance on energy imports. But as Tokyo considers long-term plans to switch to an experimental, recycled nuclear fuel, it is also facing new allegations that officials misled the public in the past about less pricey alternatives.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry acknowledged Saturday that a study it conducted in 1994 showed that reprocessing radioactive waste into a plutonium-uranium fuel would cost twice as much as burying it at a disposal site.

The study wasn't publicly released until after reports about it surfaced in the national Asahi and Mainichi newspapers.

"It was originally for internal decision-making purposes only," ministry official Tadao Yanase told The Associated Press.

Yanase said the ministry wasn't even considering directly disposing of nuclear waste from commercial reactors a decade ago.

The allegations that policy-makers concealed data about reprocessing fuel costs marked the latest setback for the nation's nuclear program, which has been plagued by recent safety violations, reactor malfunctions and accidents.

They come as the Atomic Energy Commission, which draws up energy policy, prepares to meet in coming weeks to discuss scaling back plans to use reprocessed fuel -- known as mixed oxide, or MOX -- for reactors in the face of opposition from local residents and criticism from nuclear experts.

Japan's 52 nuclear plants account for nearly 35 percent of its energy supply.

Officials say future expansion of the nuclear grid is crucial: It would lower resource-poor Japan's dependence on oil, natural gas and coal imports, they say.

A policy blueprint calls for building 11 new plants and raising electricity output to nearly 40 percent of the national supply by 2010. As many as 18 electricity-generating reactors would use MOX as a transition to more advanced fast-breeder reactors, which run on plutonium and can also generate extra plutonium fuel.

"MOX is more efficient than current technology. We could recycle spent uranium fuel, not just burn through it once like we do now," said Osamu Goto, a Cabinet Office energy policy official.

Experts say the MOX program would solve another problem: a shortage of nuclear waste-storage space.

With no permanent nuclear waste disposal site in Japan, domestic nuclear plants are forced to hold onto spent fuel rods, said Tatsujiro Suzuki, a nuclear researcher at the Central Research Institute of the Electric Power Industry.

Media reports say those waste-storage pools will be full within a decade.

"If nuclear plants can't send their waste to a repository, they will have to shut down once their pools are filled," Suzuki said.

But a string of safety problems since the country's worst nuclear accident in 1999 has left the program in a shambles and undermined public faith in nuclear energy.

Japan's only plant designed to run on MOX, the Fugen reactor, has been permanently shuttered since March 2003 due to high operating costs.

The country's first experimental fast-breeder reactor, Monju, also has been off-line since 1995, when more than a ton of volatile liquid sodium leaked from its cooling system. A bungled cover-up of the damage led Japanese courts to order the facility permanently closed.

Currently, the fate of Tokyo's MOX program rests on a major fuel reprocessing plant being built in northern Aomori prefecture (state).

Already years behind schedule following a radioactive water leak in late 2002 and protests from local officials, the Rokkasho village plant won't be operational until 2006, Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. officials say.

It's not clear if Saturday's revelation about the 1994 study will influence the Atomic Energy Commission's discussions about whether to revise policy. Commission officials weren't available for comment.

"The assumptions of the study are far different from the actual situation now," Yanase, the ministry official, said.

But Steve Fetter, a University of Maryland professor who advised the commission against reprocessing in a presentation in Tokyo last month, said it would be expensive to operate the Rokkasho plant, and that Japanese consumers would see higher electricity bills.

He also warned about the security concerns of stockpiling so much plutonium, which could be diverted and used to make nuclear weapons.

"Instead of reprocessing fuel, it would be wise for Japan to establish an interim storage space for spent fuel," like the U.S.-proposed site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada, Fetter said.

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