

JAPAN PUTS NUCLEAR REGULATION IN THE HANDS OF ENVIRONMENT MINISTRY



At a time when several high profile conservative politicians in the U.S. including presidential hopefuls Michelle Bachmann and Newt Gingrich are calling for the elimination of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Japanese Government is looking to do the complete opposite and expand the authority of the Japanese Environment Ministry to include nuclear power regulation.

After being criticized for being too cozy with Japanese utility companies in the wake of the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, nuclear regulators in Japan will soon operate as part of the Japanese Environment Ministry.

The decision is being called a significant victory for Prime Minister Naoto Kan, who has been pushing hard for greater separation between the nuclear industry and the powerful Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), the agency most recently responsible for regulating the nuclear industry via their control of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA). Kan is expected to step down as prime minister after he passes two major pieces of legislation — one outlining a new renewable energy push and the other dealing with the deficit.

The nuclear power industry in Japan is facing an uphill battle as public calls range from shutting down all of the country's thirty nuclear power plants to more transparency and scrutiny in the nuclear power sector. But the dysfunctional public relations regime that emerged in the hours, days and weeks following the accident at Fukushima Daiichi is apparently still spinning. Recent government disclosures over the last couple weeks have shed light on an extensive "astro-turfing" campaign in which electric utilities worked with government officials to stage public events and pack employees into recent public forums to sway opinion in favor of nuclear power.

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