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Shimane Prefecture group delivers petition to Gov. Zenbei Mizoguchi opposing restart of Matsue reactor

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OSAKA – A Shimane Prefecture-based citizens group delivered a petition signed by nearly 48,000 people opposed to the restart of a local nuclear reactor to Gov. Zenbei Mizoguchi on Tuesday.

The total includes 32,491 residents of the prefecture, which has a population of about 684,000, making it Japan's second least populated prefecture after neighboring Tottori as of last year. The remaining signatures came mostly from those in four surrounding prefectures.

Chugoku Electric Power Co. operates the nearly 30-year-old No. 2 reactor at the Shimane nuclear plant in the prefectural capital of Matsue, and hopes to restart it.

The petition notes that despite new nuclear safety standards adopted in the wake of the March 2011 triple meltdown at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, the safety of such plants can't be guaranteed.

Additionally, the petition raises concerns specific to the prefecture.

“Nearly 470,000 people living in the vicinity of the Shimane nuclear power plant would have to be evacuated (in the event of a disaster). Many are elderly or in hospitals and require assistance, and the places where they would be evacuated haven't been properly prepared,” the petition said. “If an earthquake and a nuclear accident occur at the same time, roads for evacuation and emergency assistance could be cut off,” it warned.

The petition also points out that spent nuclear fuel pools at nuclear power plants around the country are nearly full, and that if the No. 2 reactor is restarted, both the prefecture and Matsue will have to think quickly about what happens with additional waste.

Last year, the utility found a crack on the welded joint of a metal cover inside the reactor. The utility said no radiation leaked. That came after holes in ventilation ducts, believed to be due to corrosion, were discovered in the reactor's central control room. The reactor remains under inspection.

Any restart of the Shimane No. 2 reactor would require the approval of Mizoguchi. The governor, who faces a re-election campaign next year, has emphasized that Chugoku Electric has to convince residents that the plant is safe to operate and that the problems discovered so far have been solved.

"Local media reports indicate that the governor is being very cautious about the restart issue," said Susumu Adachi, a spokesman for the group.

A long delay to the restart of the No. 2 reactor could mean fewer years of possible operation before it reaches 40 years old in 2029. Before then, the utility would have to determine whether to apply for a 20-year extension or scrap it. Chugoku Electric has already decided to decommission the Shimane No. 1 reactor.

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