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Japan considers scrapping fast-breeder reactor as costs mount

Kyodo

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The government is considering scrapping the troubled Monju fast-breeder reactor after calculating that readying it for restart would cost several hundred billion yen, sources said Monday.

A political decision on decommissioning the reactor is now in sight, with Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga joining talks to determine its fate, the sources said.

The facility in Fukui Prefecture has been beset by safety problems and has only been **operational for a total of 250 days since it first went critical in 1994.**

Decommissioning Monju would deal a serious blow to the nation's vaunted fuel cycle policy, in which the reactor was designed to play a central role. The plan is to develop a commercial fast-breeder reactor that produces more plutonium than it consumes.

The science ministry has been trying to find a new entity to run the reactor, which is currently operated by the government-backed Japan Atomic Energy Agency.

The ministry was ordered to do this by the Nuclear Regulation Authority in November, after the NRA expressed exasperation with the operator's consistent failure to make the plant a success.

Nuclear safety has been a hot-button issue in Japan in the wake of the disaster in 2011 at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

The ministry has been consulting a panel of energy experts on whether to keep Monju alive or to scrap it but has failed to identify a new entity to take over management.

In either case, substantial amounts of money are needed. The agency estimated in 2012 that it would cost around **¥300 billion** to scrap the reactor in a process lasting over 30 years.

Safety problems included a major fire caused by a sodium leak in 1995.

The total of 250 operational days has come at a cost of more than $\text{¥}1$ trillion in building and maintenance costs.

If Monju restarts operations, the ministry says its fuel must be replaced. In the event of a restart, new guidelines for fast-breeder reactors must also be created and any related construction will have to reflect these guidelines.

Making the building's facilities meet the new guidelines will likely cost nearly $\text{¥}100$ billion, the sources said, adding there would be further expenses for replacing old equipment.