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Problems remain in management of decontamination workers' radiation exposure

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This year, around 10 workers were dispatched by the Fukushima Municipal Government to decontaminate part of the city. On their work reports, the figure 0.002 was repeated for each worker day after day. This was the "record" of their estimated radiation exposure in microsieverts per hour at the time they finished their work.

The repetition of figures was unveiled by a subcontractor in charge of work at the site.

"No actual measuring took place," he said. "I just wrote what the boss ordered, though I thought the figures were too low."

The subcontractor also disclosed that job equipment was not screened after the work was completed. Instead, he was just told to write a figure "between 180 and 260 cpm (counts per minute)," he says. Equipment cannot be removed from the site when the reading is 13,000 cpm or higher.

"The prime contractor also approved of the reports we submitted," he said.

Sloppy management at decontamination sites was not limited to radiation exposure readings. The man was also ordered to fabricate the effectiveness of decontamination work. Normally radioactive

materials have to be carefully washed from the roofs and walls of homes with high-pressure sprayers, but instead they were just splashed with water. Furthermore, the readings of survey meters placed at other locations were used.

The man submitted photos outlining these actions to the prime contractor. A Fukushima Municipal Government representative commented, "We are visiting the sites and checking the work details and documentation," but added, "We haven't heard that any illicit activities took place."

In January 2012, the Industrial Safety and Health Act Regulation Concerning Prevention from Radiation Hazards Due to Ionizing Radiation came into force. It gave decontamination workers the same radiation exposure limits as nuclear power plant workers had (a maximum of 50 millisieverts per year and 100 millisieverts over five years). Employers must have their workers undergo special health checks, and they must record and preserve their radiation readings. But sloppy record-keeping is not the only obstacle to achieving thorough management of radiation levels. The existence of "decontamination gypsies" who travel from one site to another also plays a part.

At the time the regulation on ionizing radiation hazards came into effect, there was no centralized system for managing individual workers' total radiation exposure. As a result, it was hard to grasp the accumulated exposure of workers who moved from one site to another or who engaged in decontamination work after having taken part in efforts to bring the disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant under control.

In November 2013, major construction companies involved in prime contract joint ventures got together and built a uniform management system. The system called for workers' radiation dosages to be recorded in radiation management handbooks, just like those of workers at nuclear power plants. The same figures were also to be recorded in the central registration center for radiation workers at the Radiation Effects Association in Tokyo.

The system, however, is governed by private rules alone, and only covers workers involved in decontamination commissioned directly by the central government. Work by Fukushima and other municipalities, in which the level of radiation is deemed to be relatively low, is not included.

However, one 45-year-old man who has been at seven decontamination sites since October 2012 comments, "In decontamination by cities, towns and villages, there are areas where the radiation level is actually higher than the levels seen during decontamination managed directly by the central government." There are so-called "microspots" where radiation levels are high even in areas being decontaminated by municipal governments.

The man says that at government-commissioned decontamination sites he has been to, radiation is now being managed properly, with dosimeters handed out to workers. But when it comes to locally commissioned decontamination work, he doesn't know how much radiation he has been exposed to, and he wonders what his accumulated dosage is.

The man set up a company with four workers in February last year. This enabled him to take on government-commissioned decontamination at the fourth tier of subcontracting. However, since his company does not meet the requirements established by the Ministry of the Environment for subcontracting firms, his workers ostensibly take on jobs as employees of the first-tier subcontractor. At decontamination sites there are many businesses like his one. Labor sharks also have a presence at these sites.

At sites with both true and ostensible employers on the scene, it is unclear who takes responsibility for management of radiation doses, the man has noticed.

"If they're not going to manage it properly, I want to show them that our company can do it," he said.

According to the Fukuoka branch of credit research company Teikoku Databank Ltd., nearly all of Fukushima Prefecture's 8,000 or so construction companies are thought to be involved in decontamination work. But cleaning and delivery companies also take part. In many cases, a company's head office is outside the prefecture, but it also has a branch within the prefecture. This makes it difficult to ascertain the actual number of businesses involved.

One 58-year-old man who applied to take part in decontamination work through the governmental Hello Work employment center came to Fukushima from Kyushu. He soon learned that the employer was assembling workers even though it had no prospect of securing contracts to perform decontamination work. He quickly found another business in Fukushima and worked at three decontamination sites. Last year he moved to a construction site in Kanagawa Prefecture.

"Decontamination has produced a temporary economic bubble, and all sorts of businesses have got in on it," he said. But it is not all good.

"I get looked at as if I'm doing something dirty, and I think I've had enough of it," he said.

According to the Ministry of the Environment and the Fukushima Prefectural Government, about 28,000 people per day were involved in decontamination work during the summer last year. This winter the figure reached about 20,000. The overall situation regarding radiation exposure remains unclear.