

News

Fukushima forestry industry at risk of collapse due to ongoing nuclear crisis

Forestry cooperatives that oversee woodlands in areas designated as no-entry zones and planned evacuation zones due to high levels of radiation from the ongoing nuclear crisis in Fukushima Prefecture are in danger of collapse, it has emerged.

Forestry workers are currently not operating outdoors in the affected areas out of concerns over radiation exposure. In addition, because it is more difficult to improve soil conditions of woodlands than that of farmland, it is likely that forestry workers will be kept from returning to work for a long time. Long-term neglect of woodlands, in turn, can lead to various risks, including the increased incidence of mudslides.

According to the Fukushima Prefectural Government and an association of Fukushima Prefecture forestry cooperatives, there is approximately 138,000 hectares of forest mostly under the jurisdiction of five different forestry cooperatives in the 11 municipalities where entry is prohibited or evacuation will be required in the coming weeks based on government directives.

After the village of Iitate was designated a planned evacuation zone and the government instructed workers there to refrain from working outdoors, a local forestry cooperative that oversees over 7,200 hectares of forest determined that it was unfeasible to continue its operations. As a result, the majority of the cooperatives' 11 officials and 15 workers will be forced to go on leave in the near future. Meanwhile, one cooperative official worries about what the implications of interrupted operations will be.

"If we can't go in to thin the trees for a year or longer, the underbrush will grow and the saplings that have been newly planted will suffer from lack of sunlight," said cooperative chief Hiroshi Sagara. "The forest will fall into disrepair and trees will fail to grow well."

Sagara is also concerned about severe soil contamination by radioactive materials. "Improving soil quality (in forests) is harder than it is for farmland. Even if the evacuation orders are rescinded, it may be a long time before radiation levels are low enough for workers to go in there." He also fears that even if such problems are alleviated, there may not be enough workers to support the industry at that point. "People who land new jobs where they've evacuated to may not return to forestry. There may be a shortage of workers, preventing us from sufficiently caring for the woodlands."

The Futaba area forestry cooperative, which presides over some 31,000 hectares of woodlands, is located within a 30-kilometer radius from the crippled Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant. The cooperative office was relocated from the village of Tomioka to the city of Tamura approximately 40 kilometers away, and some 80 workers have evacuated to various locations both in and outside the prefecture. Cooperative chief Kimio Akimoto, however, says he wants to keep the cooperative going.

"There are workers who say that they want to come back when we restart operations," he said. "There will be a lot less work for us, but I want the cooperative to survive."

Meanwhile, woodlands in the city of Tamura, parts of which were previously under the government's indoor-standby directive, are now designated an "emergency evacuation preparation zone," where residents are required to be prepared to take shelter indoors or evacuate by themselves, but are otherwise permitted to work outdoors. At Fukushima Central Forestry Cooperative, which resumed operations on May 25, officials and

workers have voiced concerns over the difficulty of prompt evacuation in case of an emergency during outdoor work. Most of the work right now is being carried out using heavy machinery with doors and windows that can be closed shut, and plans are underway to supply site supervisors with radiation meters to further ensure workers' safety.

The association of Fukushima prefectural forestry cooperatives plans to support the five cooperatives by providing them with work that would have gone to other prefectural cooperatives. The Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry's Forestry Agency is slated to investigate contamination levels of mountain forests, but has yet to establish specific decontamination measures.

"For the time being, we would like the industry to use TEPCO's payments for damages and aid from the national government to continue its operations and strive for its survival," a ministry official said.

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