

IAEA Mission Sees Strengthened Safety Inspections in Japan, Encourages Further Enhancement of Regulatory Oversight

An International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) team of experts today said Japan had strengthened inspections as part of extensive efforts in recent years to improve its regulatory framework for nuclear and radiation safety.

The senior regulatory experts recognized that significant progress had been made since a previous IAEA mission in 2016. They identified some areas for further improvement, recommending measures on occupational radiation protection and transport safety.

The Integrated Regulatory Review Service (IRRS) team carried out the eight-day follow-up mission to review Japan's implementation of recommendations and suggestions made during the initial IRRS mission four years ago.

It was conducted at the request of the Government of Japan and hosted by the Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA), which was established in 2012 as an independent and transparent regulatory body following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident.

"Japan has made considerable headway. The NRA has taken many steps to enhance its regulatory programmes," said IRRS team leader Ramzi Jammal, Executive Vice-President and Chief Regulatory Operations Officer in the Regulatory Operations Branch of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission. "This work to strengthen safety should continue in order to address remaining regulatory challenges, including the effective implementation of the new inspection regime."

Before being shut down following the Fukushima Daiichi accident, Japan's 54 nuclear power reactors produced about 30 per cent of the country's electricity. Nine reactors have since been re-started after conforming to new safety requirements introduced after the accident in 2011. The country also has fuel cycle facilities, research reactors and widely uses nuclear applications in industry, hospitals and other fields.

IRRS peer review missions are designed to strengthen the effectiveness of the national nuclear regulatory infrastructure, based on IAEA safety standards and international good practices, while recognizing the responsibility of each country to ensure nuclear and radiation safety.

"The NRA has worked very hard to implement enhancements in accordance with the recommendations and suggestions provided by the initial IRRS mission," said NRA Chairman Toyoshi Fuketa. "Our discussions with the follow-up mission team will help us achieve continuous improvement. The NRA will never become complacent regarding nuclear safety."

The scope of the follow-up mission covered the same areas that were reviewed in 2016, including the responsibilities and functions of the Government and the regulatory body. In addition, the team was this time requested by Japan to review safety related to the transportation of radioactive material.



The experts said Japan had implemented many of the recommendations and suggestions from 2016. The NRA's achievements include:

- The establishment of an inspection programme with increased powers to access nuclear facilities, including the right to carry out unannounced inspections at any time.
- The introduction of a systematic process to regularly review and update safety regulations and guidance documents.

The IRRS team said there were areas requiring further work and recommended that the NRA:

- Fully implements its new integrated management system.
- Further strengthens its regulatory oversight of radiation protection for workers.

Regarding transport safety, the IRRS team noted that Japan generally implements regulations in line with IAEA standards. It recommended some specific improvements, including:

- Periodic exercises to test emergency response arrangements for the transportation of radioactive material.
- Extension of inspection programmes to cover all types of packages used to transport such material.

Greg Rzentkowski, Director of the IAEA Division of Nuclear Installation Safety, commended Japan for its strong commitment to maintaining high nuclear safety standards. "The NRA has enhanced its regulatory programmes which should now be fully implemented in a manner commensurate with the assessed risks posed by regulated facilities and activities to ensure adequate protection of the public and the environment," he said, recalling that operators must always demonstrate the safety of their facilities.

The team leader, Jammal, acknowledged the NRA's increased international engagement and encouraged it to interact more substantively with the nuclear industry in Japan. "Open and frequent communication with the licensee is very positive for nuclear safety and does not compromise regulatory independence," he said.

The 18-member IRRS team comprised senior regulatory experts from Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, Pakistan, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and six IAEA staff members. One observer from Canada also participated in the mission.

The final mission report will be provided to the Government of Japan in about three months. The Government plans to make the report public.

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