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New priorities turn Kyoto goals into an afterthought

The Washington Post

With the nation's oil and gas plants firing at full capacity, government officials say there is little chance Japan will honor its pledge to cut greenhouse gas emissions significantly over the next decade, a startling retreat for the country that once spearheaded an international agreement on climate change.

The earlier, ambitious target to slash emissions 25 percent from 1990 levels by 2020 has been overrun by a more urgent, short-term need: to burn fossil fuels and maintain a steady electricity supply in the wake of the abrupt departure from nuclear power.

Japan, still the world's third-largest economy, was once the poster child for aggressive environmental policy. It chaired the historic conference 15 years ago that led to the Kyoto Protocol, the world's first climate pact, and it pioneered clean technology, using decades of research to boost energy efficiency.

The centerpiece of the nation's efforts to combat global warming was nuclear power. But since the disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant last year, the country has been forced to sharply increase its use of dirtier fossil fuels.

Environmental experts note that, with the right policy push, Japan could build up its long-neglected renewable energy sector and eventually fill the void left by atomic energy, which before the Fukushima disaster accounted for one-third of the nation's electricity needs. But that will take years, and greenhouse gas emissions will spike in the meantime as power companies struggle to meet demand.

But the government hasn't yet formally backed away from its pledge in 2009 to slash emissions by 2020, a government spokeswoman cautioned. It has also honored its commitment to the Kyoto Protocol, which required industrialized countries to reduce greenhouse gases by an average of 5 percent from 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012.

But a government report issued last month highlighted the enormous challenges now standing in the way of the more ambitious pledge for deep additional cuts by 2020. The report said it would expect only a 5 to 9 percent emissions cut from 1990 levels by 2020. Meeting the 25 percent target is "extremely difficult" without nuclear power, said Shuichiro Niihara, a

manager for carbon-reducing strategies in the environment ministry.

The pledge, announced by Yukio Hatoyama days before he took office as prime minister, followed up on a campaign promise and maintained Japan's status as a low-emissions front-runner.

Even before the Fukushima disaster, environmental experts said the 25 percent target would have been difficult to attain, but they praised Japan for trying. "Fukushima makes it much, much harder," said Elliot Diringer, executive vice president at the nonpartisan Arlington-based Center for Climate and Energy Solutions.

A leading activist, Hisayo Takada, a climate and energy campaigner for Greenpeace, said that Japan is now paying the price for the years in which its support for nuclear power meant that Tokyo "gave lip service to renewable energy but didn't give it real attention."

Since the quake and tsunami crippled the Fukushima complex and triggered the release of nuclear material starting in March 2011, 48 of the nation's 50 working reactors have been idled and imports of fossil fuels have soared to record levels to compensate.

Government officials admit that, amid widespread public opposition, there's slim hope of restarting additional reactors until at least next year.

The Environment Ministry, responsible for tracking greenhouse gas emissions, hasn't released official data for 2011 or 2012. But the Yomiuri newspaper, citing ministry estimates, said this month that actual emissions for 2012 were projected to climb to about 1.32 billion tons, which would be the highest level since 2007, just before the Kyoto Protocol began requiring greenhouse gas reductions.

Named for the city in which it was signed, the Kyoto Protocol was an attempt to stem the use of greenhouse gases that were building up in the atmosphere and believed to be causing global warming. The accord, among other things, mandated that industrialized countries cut greenhouse gas emissions — chiefly carbon dioxide — by an average of at least 5 percent from 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. Countries could meet the target naturally, or by using emissions trading, buying credits from countries that were cutting more than their share.

The government has stuck to its Kyoto commitments by taking full advantage of those trading options. Credits purchased from Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Latvia allowed Japan to claim credit for cutting emissions by 8.8 percent, 13.7 percent and 10.1 percent in 2008, 2009 and 2010, respectively, compared with the baseline 1990 level. Because of its work in those first three years, the five-year Kyoto target is likely to be met, even as emissions levels begin to rise.

It's beyond 2012 that the challenges grow because the nation's renewable energy sector is still lagging — supplying just 10 percent of the country's energy — and because the government has already given up plans to build

more than a dozen new reactors that were supposed to further drive down emissions levels.

These difficulties come when the Kyoto agreement is months from expiring, meaning the emissions reductions will soon become strictly voluntary, not obligatory. Although countries will start meeting late next month to discuss an extension of the pact, Japan has no intention of taking part — something it signaled before the Fukushima disaster.

The pact has forced reductions among its signees, particularly in Western Europe, but it's done nothing to curb global emissions, which have risen 1.5 times since 1990. That's because Kyoto governs nations that account for only 20 percent of the world's emissions; developing countries, such as China, India and Brazil, aren't included, and the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the treaty.

Japan has come to object to the Kyoto agreement because it doesn't include the United States and China, which are together responsible for 40 percent of the world's emissions. Japan produces 4 percent of the world's greenhouse gases, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"Japan will not participate into the second commitment" period if Kyoto is extended beyond 2012, Masaru Sato, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, said in an email, using the common term of a renewal.

Even with aggressive buildup of the renewable energy industry, Japan's emissions levels in 2030 will be about 13 percent higher than they would have been at that same time with full use of nuclear power, according to a June report from the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, based in Kanagawa Prefecture.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda promised last week that Japan would undergo a "green revolution," and environmental experts — skeptical after years of the central government's nuclear promotion — acknowledge that they see early signs of progress.

Most important is the introduction in July of what is known as a feed-in-tariff, in which the government essentially guarantees that utility companies will buy renewable energy at a fixed price over the next 20 years. The policy, already used in some European countries, spurs individuals and businesses to develop solar panels, build wind farms and invest in green technology that they might previously have considered too risky. In the first two months after the tariff took effect, Japan received applications to build 1.6 gigawatts of renewable capacity, more than that generated by a nuclear reactor.

In the coming decades, Japan also figures to achieve major emissions cuts with more energy-efficient machinery, smart meters, electric cars, even cleaner use of fossil fuels.

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