

# Fukushima After Meltdowns: 13 Years of Accidents, Quakes, Insults

By John LaForge

The catastrophic earthquake, tsunami, and triple reactor meltdowns that struck northeast Japan at Fukushima in March 2011 began a pollution disaster that keeps growing and surprising. The following updates show the worst-ever reactor incident is still a present tense event. Even without going into the 20 million tons of radioactive debris piled in mounds of bags at 100,000 Japanese sites, failing plastic containers holding corrosive nuclear sludge produced by the wastewater filter system, or airborne dispersal of hot particles from incinerators all across Japan burning Fukushima debris, this issue's update is still over-long. China and Russia have banned all Japanese seafood imports after Japan began disposing of contaminated wastewater in the Pacific. Between the deliberate dispersal of radioactive wastes and accidental spills and leaks, all in the most earthquake-prone country on Earth, the dreams of clean, cheap nuclear power turn to nightmares immediately upon waking.

## Still Finding Broad Contamination of Wild Foods

Edible mushrooms found in Narusawa village in Yamashiro prefecture, 227 miles from the Fukushima meltdowns, were found with high levels of radioactive cesium, according to Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. The ministry also reported higher-than-permitted contamination of edible plants in three other prefectures between 86

strike its islands nearly every day. — The Guardian, Jan. 1; Kyodo News, Feb. 21, 2024; World Data Info

## 'Cleanups' See Radiation Leaks and Spills

According to Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) which still operates the Fukushima site, ten of 16 valves mistakenly left open by workers spewed some 5.5 metric tons of highly radioactive wastewater onto the site in early February. The leak sprang from machinery used to remove radioactive cesium and strontium from wastewater severely contaminated after it passes through hundreds of tons of melted reactor fuel called "corium" amassed deep within the three destroyed Fukushima reactors. Tepco, the only source reporting on the incident, later claimed that only 1.5 tons had spilled. An accident in October contaminated four workers who were sprayed with radioactive wastewater when a hose broke.

These wastewater accidents were international scandals and forced Japan's industry minister Ken Saito to make a face-saving spectacle out of publicly shaming Tepco president Tomoaki Kobayakawa. On Feb. 21, the minister demanded more "safety awareness and preventive measures." Minister Saito even told Kobayakawa to investigate the accidents. The Tepco exec. dutifully apologized to the minister, as reporters took notes on the theatrical scolding. — AP, Feb. 21; CGTN, Feb. 16; Japan Public TV, Feb. 14; *China Daily*, Feb. 7; Reuters, Feb. 1, 2024

## Japan's Illegal Radioactive Dumping

Writing for Counterpunch last September, Robert Hunsiker noted two ways that Japan's disposal of radioactive wastewater in the Pacific violates the law. First, the long-time president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research Arjun Makhijani is quoted regarding the failure of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to enforce its global regulations. Makhijani writes, "[The IAEA's] outright refusal to apply its own guidance documents ... [and] Its constricted view of the dumping plan has allowed it to evade its responsibilities to many countries. Its eagerness to assure the public that harm will be 'negligible' has been carried to the point of grossly overstating well-known facts about tritium."

Second, Hunziker cited an article by Victoria Cruz-De Jesus in the American University International Law Review, quoting: "Japan's policy to release wastewater into the Pacific Ocean constitutes a violation of Japan's obligations under UNCLOS Article 192, which requires state parties to 'protect and preserve the marine environment.' Additionally, Japan's pollution of the marine environment from land-based sources violates UNCLOS Article 207." Hunziker concluded Japan could have pursued options which complied with "some of its treaty obligations ... but ultimately settled for the cheapest, easiest, most convenient, yet most harmful, policy."

## Warnings About Failed Water Treatment

Tatsujiro Suzuki is the vice director of the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition at Nagasaki University and one of Japan's premier experts on nuclear power. He spoke to South Korea's Hankyoreh English daily on Feb. 20, and said in part: "... in August 2018, Japanese media reported that around 70% of the ["treated"] water stored in tanks at Fukushima contained higher-than-permitted levels of cesium, strontium, and iodine, which are extremely harmful to the body. I was genuinely shocked. Tepco had persistently claimed that they had reduced the level of radionuclides ... it's essential that we treat the water in those storage tanks a second time." Suzuki also pointed out that "there was no study done on the potential environmental impact," and despite an "IAEA report that declared that the 'treated water would have a negligible radiological impact to people and the environment,'" the IAEA did not "recommend or support" the Japanese dump plan in "any way."

Ken Buesseler of Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution wrote: "[I]n 2018, Tepco ... announced for the first time that the tanks also contain concerning

levels of other, more harmful radioactive materials such as cobalt-60 and strontium-90, which are much more likely to end up on the seafloor or be taken up by sea life ... [the] data we have ... come from a fraction of the tanks — about 200 — and don't include other potential contaminants, such as plutonium." — *Knowable Magazine*, March 11, 2021

## Japanese Court to Hear Lawsuit Vs Dumping

The case *Citizens v. Tepco and the State of Japan* was filed in Fukushima District Court in September last year. In it, 151 citizens appeal for an injunction to halt the release. Last November, more citizens including people from the fishing industry joined the suit. Among the claims of the plaintiffs is that the massive releases violate Article 4 of the "Protocol to the London Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes." Article 4 prohibits the "dumping" of wastewater into the sea, and the plaintiffs argue that the law applies to disposing of any and all radioactive waste in the oceans, including from pipelines. The legal dilemma is that pipelines pump radioactive wastes into the sea, but Article 4 prohibits "dumping" as it was practiced during the Cold War by rolling barrels from ships. — Nishikawa and Hesselman, *Blog of the European Journal of International Law*, Jan. 16, 2024

## Pacific Island States Condemn Disposal

The Polynesian bloc called for a pause in Japan's dumping of radioactive wastewater during the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Cook Islands last November. The bloc includes Niue, Cook Islands, Samoa, American Samoa, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, Tuvalu, and Tonga. The Pacific Islands Forum has consistently objected to Japan's ocean dumping. The Forum also includes Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. In June 2023 the Forum declared Japan's sanctioned pollution of the Pacific "is not merely a nuclear safety issue. It is rather a nuclear legacy issue, an ocean, fisheries, environment, biodiversity, climate change, and health issue with the future of our children and future generations at stake." — Cook Islands News, Nov. 7; CGTN Jun. 27, 2023



Students in Seoul, South Korea shaving their heads to protest the wastewater dump. Indonesian activists sued the Japanese government. Photo: CNBC 2021.

and 292 miles from Fukushima. The mushrooms in Narusawa had 50% more cesium-137 than permitted by regulations. The United States is more at ease with people eating cesium-137 than Japan, allowing twelve times as much in food, and doesn't make an exception for baby food. Radioactive cesium was released in large amounts during the three reactor meltdowns at Fukushima. — *The STAR* (Malaysia), *Xinhua news*, and *China.org*, Nov. 7, 2023

## January Earthquake Overstressed Reactors

The severe magnitude 7.6 earthquake that struck western Japan January 1, killing 82 and leaving 31,000 homeless, shook and "inflicted stress" on parts of two nuclear reactors that "exceeded the limit" of their design capacity, Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority said in a report. Both reactors at Shika in Ishikawa Prefecture on the west coast were offline when the quake struck, but Shinsuke Yamanaka, chief of the NRA, told reporters that jolts from undersea seismic faults which triggered the quake "must be factored in as new knowledge" when updating safety standards. Yamanaka urged operator Hokuriku Electric Power Co. to find out why the Shika reactors' electric transformers have both broken down and have "partially prevented the [reactors] from receiving power." The earthquake and tsunami-caused loss of offsite power at Fukushima-Daiichi in March 2011 resulted in the collapse of cooling systems and the catastrophic meltdown of three large reactors there. Japan's 54 reactors are all on its coastline and vulnerable to earthquakes which



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We wish to recognize the outspoken, dedicated volunteer Sharon Cody who died Jan. 9, 2024. We will greatly miss her constructive criticism, her deep belief in the possible betterment of the human condition, and her comic poems.

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