

Participants, experts discuss energy priorities, mix

New hearing held to gauge nuke sentiment

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The government continued to solicit public opinion on nuclear energy policy over the weekend by holding a discussion-oriented polling session in Tokyo involving about 300 citizens from across the country.

This is the first time the government has used "deliberative polling," a type of poll developed by Stanford University to bring together a cross section of individuals to discuss an issue by themselves and with experts in order to gauge the opinion of a well-informed electorate, to develop national policy.

However, it's still unclear to what extent the results will be incorporated.

The 286 participants in the two-day forum, conducted by Keio University, were selected from among 6,849 people randomly polled by phone across the country. Unlike the 11-city tour of government-sponsored hearings that wrapped up on Saturday, utility employees were not deliberately excluded from speaking and their participation could not be confirmed.

The participants in the deliberative poll were surveyed three times, including before and after the weekend discussions.

In an initial phone survey in July, they were asked to prioritize the most important aspects of their power supply, such as stability, safety, cost or impact on the environment.

They were also asked which of the government's three scenarios they prefer for nuclear energy dependence by 2030: zero percent, 15 percent, or 20 to 25 percent.

The purpose of the sessions was to deepen the understanding of the energy debate through discussions. The participants were able to question nuclear experts on the issues and were polled before and after the two days of talks and question-and-answer sessions.

Keio and Stanford professors will study the results to determine the changes in their opinions. The results will be released later this month.

In two 90-minute sessions, 20 groups discussed the key elements of Japan's energy resources and their preference on the energy mix. Safety and securing a stable supply were the dominant issues, interspersed with critical comments aimed at the government and Tokyo Electric Power Co., the operator of the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power.

"We should think what's most important in our lives," said one female participant, who says she supports the zero percent scenario. "Lax safety measures are threatening our lives, and I want to have clear evidence that nuclear power is safe."

Some questioned the appropriateness of even raising the issues of safety and supply in same discussion. "I understand our lives are important, but the cost will go up if we give up on nuclear energy, and it will drive more businesses to shift overseas," said a male participant. "These should not be debated on the same level."

Others complained of the difficulty of making an informed decision on the proper energy mix without full and accurate information from the government regarding its reserves of natural resources.

"When we were children, we were told that we will exhaust petroleum in 40 years, but we still have it," said a male participant. "I would like to have the real numbers."

After the discussion session, each group was given an opportunity to ask one question to experts on nuclear power and energy policy. But some of the participants criticized the responses as vague or contradictory.

"After the Fukushima accident, the government is trying to brace for unpredictable accidents," said Akira Yamaguchi, a nuclear engineering professor at Osaka University, when asked if Japan's nuclear power is really safe. "The government's standard will be in line with global standards."

Other experts disagreed. "The disaster prevention measures have not been implemented," said professor Hitoshi Yoshioka of Kyushu University, who served on a government panel investigating the Fukushima accident.

But experts admitted they were unsure how Japan could achieve a 35 percent dependency rate on renewable energy in the event that nuclear power generation is abolished altogether. "Every energy source has pros and cons," said Kazuhiko Ogimoto, a professor in energy system integration at the University of Tokyo. "We have to think in the context of the time frame as well, and it takes time to achieve 35 percent dependence on renewables."

The deliberative poll was part of the government's effort to encourage a national debate on Japan's energy future.

The previous 11 government-sponsored public hearings, which wrapped up on Saturday, were harshly criticized for how they were carried out, such as with the participation of employees of the energy industry.

The government is seeking public opinions until Aug. 12 via email, fax and regular mail.

After the two-day forum, some participants reported that their stance had not changed significantly but that it was a good learning opportunity.

"I am still against nuclear power, but I realized that it's really hard to achieve zero nuclear dependency," said Shizuyo Araki, 74, who attended from Sapporo. "But I can't believe everything the government says, either."

Many were skeptical of the government's effort. Even though the government is slated to compile the policy by

the end of August, it has not declared how it will use the thousands of comments collected or if it can meet the deadline. "I do not know how much of the public's opinion will be reflected," said Yasukimi Sato, 45, from Okayama Prefecture. "My bet is they are going to use us as an excuse that they've heard us out when they decided on a scenario other than zero percent."

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