

## Who decides Kori plants' fate?

Role of focus group a political hot potato for those involved

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A nine-member commission collecting public opinion on whether to permanently halt construction of the Shin Kori 5 and 6 nuclear reactors is at odds with the government over who will take full responsibility for the decision.

On Thursday, the commission, which was launched earlier this week, announced that it doesn't plan on making the "final decision" on the reactors' fate, but will only make "policy recommendations" to the government.

However, the Office for Government Policy Coordination, under the prime minister's office, said at the time it announced plans to create the commission that it would follow the commission's decision. A Blue House spokesman on Thursday said that plan remains in place. Apparently, the commission feels differently.

"The results from the public assessment will only be policy recommendations that will help the president and senior officials make the final decision," a commission representative announced at a press briefing after its second regular meeting.

Lee Hee-jin, a commission spokesperson, said the public assessment is not simply focused on finding out whether people agree with suspending construction or not, but instead will study how views change among a panel of people who engage in an extended discussion on the issue.

Lee also said the commission will not use the term "civilian jurors" for panel members since the term sounds too much like the members will make a legal ruling.

Besides Lee's statements Thursday, the commission's chairman, Kim Ji-hyung said earlier this week that he expects the final decision on the Shin Kori 5 and 6 reactors to be made by "related government branches or through legislative processes."

One of the reasons the commission re-emphasized its role on Thursday is because many question the legal basis for allowing a panel of people to decide the fate of important government-run projects like the nuclear power plants. On Thursday, the commission sought out the opinions of various experts and scholars on this issue, and it appears that the meeting also motivated it to make its role clear.

"The commission should proceed with public assessment and come up with options instead of making a final decision on whether to agree or disagree with the project," said Rhee June-woong, a professor of communication at Seoul National University.

Kim Hak-rin, a professor of business at Dankuk University, also argued that the public assessment shouldn't lead to the final decision.

The government seems to be confused by the commission's latest announcement. An official from the Blue House said that it plans to abide by its original plan to follow the commission's recommendation.

"The president already said he will follow the commission's decision, and there can't be any changes to that principle at this point," the official said. "Even though views [on whether to discontinue construction of the nuclear plants or not] uncovered by the public assessment turn out to be very close, we will follow the option that has the most support."

Kim Tae-yoon, a public administration professor at Hanyang University, said people will be confused about who is making the decision if the Blue House says one thing and the commission says another.

Another expert was clear about where responsibility for the final decision should rest.

"I think the National Assembly, which represents the people, should decide on the fate of the Shin Kori 5 and 6 reactors," Chung Bum-jin, a nuclear engineering professor at Kyung Hee University, said.

Meanwhile, the commission described Thursday the process it would go through to assess public opinion. It said it will choose a sample of about 20,000 people and divide them by age, sex and where they live.

Then, the commission will run a phone survey and choose about 350 people as members of a panel that will participate in the official public assessment. This method of public assessment is different from a simple survey. Regular surveys question people who may have no direct interest in politics.

Such surveys' effectiveness will be limited since many of the respondents are not following the issues being measured, or have limited knowledge. Despite these limitations, survey results remain very influential.

The commission will try to avoid these problems by asking panel members for their opinions multiple times while providing them with information from both sides of the argument.

The key point of the commission's public assessment is to see how people's opinions change throughout the three-month assessment period.

The idea to perform public assessments this way was introduced by James Fishkin, a professor of international communication at Stanford University, who first developed the so-called deliberative process in 1988.