

## Renewable Energy And Civil Society In Post-Fukushima Japan

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*AsianScientist (May 9, 2012)* - In an attempt to mitigate climate change and to enhance energy security, Japan's Ministry of Economy and Industry (METI) released a draft '[New Basic Energy Plan](#)' in June 2010, which placed nuclear power at the center of Japan's energy shift.

In addition to the country's 54 existing nuclear power plants, the strategy commissioned 14 new reactors. Together, these were expected to generate 53 percent of Japan's energy by 2030, up from about 29 percent in 2010.

Renewable energy has only played a marginal role in plans put forward by Japan's energy strategists. The New Basic Energy Plan, for instance, called for an increase in green energy from its current level of 1.1 percent (excluding hydroelectric power) to 12 percent by 2030.

The fatal incident at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant in the wake of the 11 March earthquake and tsunami has triggered a debate on the future of Japan's energy policy.

Surging public distrust in the safety of Japan's nuclear power plants forced Naoto Kan's administration to subject all reactors to stress tests, starting in July 2011. And as of 5 May 2012, [all 54 nuclear reactors](#) are offline for scheduled safety checks.

The future of Japan's nuclear energy sector has become even more contested following the government's decision to impose a 40–60 year operation limit for its nuclear power plants — but nuclear phase out does not necessarily imply a rapid shift toward renewable energy. The immediate shortage in energy resources is currently being compensated for by drastic increases in liquid natural gas imports, which surged by [55.7 percent](#) in 2011. Yet, an incremental shift toward green energy has been unfolding at the local level. With many projects first launched by civil-society groups in the 2000s, the Fukushima incident has created new momentum for such projects.

Non-profit organisations (NPOs) have actively promoted wind energy, particularly in the Hokkaido and Tohoku regions. The [Hokkaido Green Fund \(HGF\)](#), for example, has erected 'citizen windmills' on the northern island of Hokkaido. The 'Citizen Wind Power' movement currently operates 12 windmills, and has expanded to Japan's main island of Honshu, with plans to build two new utilities to generate 2,000 kilowatts of energy that will be directly supplied to companies based in Tokyo.

By far the most ambitious initiative has been launched by Hisahiro Yamamoto of the Akita Environmental Forum. In 2008, this NPO initiated the [Kingdom of Wind Project](#), which aims to build 1,000 windmills along the shores of the Japan Sea in northern Japan. While Yamamoto acknowledges the advances of initiatives such as the HGF, he argues for large-scale wind energy, with a punch: the Kingdom of Wind project conceives of sustainable energy as key to reviving Japan's rural areas. This initiative aims to counter the current periphery-center relationship between Japan's power companies and

the regions: while space and resources are provided by the regions, little profit remains in these areas.

The basic idea of the Kingdom of Wind project is that wind energy is a ‘citizen resource’, and that local citizens should benefit from its generation. This scheme builds on local financial institutions and citizen investment, and brings hope for the unfolding of a local wind power industry in northern Japan.

In Akita prefecture, a feasibility evaluation has been submitted to the authorities taking the planning of the first 178 windmills to its next phase. Similar initiatives have also been launched in the neighboring prefecture of Yamagata, to be completed between 2020 and 2030.

According to the 2011 ‘[Study of Potential for the Introduction of Renewable Energy](#)’ report by Japan’s Ministry of the Environment, wind energy in Hokkaido and Tohoku could enhance the energy supply capacity of each region’s utilities by 18.8 and 4.4 times respectively. Moreover, Iwate Prefecture aims to lift its share of renewable energy consumption from 18 to 35 percent by 2020. The promotion of renewable energy also plays a central role in reconstruction plans for the disaster-stricken area in Tohoku. Current planning for the Fukushima region includes building an offshore wind park with six windmills, through the financial assistance of METI.

Feed-in tariffs approved during Naoto Kan’s premiership and set to be launched this July offer another opportunity to further the green shift in Japan’s energy policy. Banri Kaieda, the former minister of economy, trade and industry, said that tariffs for renewable energy would be around [20 yen \(US\\$0.25\) per kilowatt](#), except for solar power, for which Japan’s government currently pays 40-42 yen (US\$0.50-0.52) per kilowatt. Adjusting to the new shift in Japan’s energy sector, [six power companies](#) in central and west Japan have also announced plans to coordinate their grids to triple their wind power capacities by 2017.

The Fukushima incident has triggered a shift in Japan’s energy policy — and Japan’s revised ‘New Energy Basic Plan’, to be released in mid-2012, will reveal the place of nuclear energy in the country’s long-term energy planning. Until then, the government would be well advised to support local initiatives in the provision of renewable energy and the construction of a sustainable community.

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