

Russian Scientists Travel to Kuril Islands to Study Effects of Fukushima Meltdown

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A view of the Kuril Islands.

Russian scientists will travel Thursday to the Kuril Islands in order to assess the fallout from Japan's Fukushima disaster, expedition head Yury Lyukanov said, stressing the group would stay out of Japanese waters.

The expedition, which is financed by the state-run nuclear agency Rosatom, will set out from the port of Vladivostok for up to 30 days and will be carried out under the auspices of the Russian Geographic Society, Lyukanov said, the Interfax news agency reported.

Representatives from the Defense Ministry, the Roshydromet weather bureau, the health and safety watchdog Rospotrebnadzor, and students from the state maritime museum will join the expedition, Lyukanov added.

The meltdown of Fukushima's nuclear reactor in 2011 in the aftermath of a tsunami was the largest nuclear disaster since Ukraine's Chernobyl plant exploded in 1986, and scientists are still working to assess its consequences.

"We have knowledge of the radiation situation near the [Fukushima] plant, but not of how the radiation spreads in the sea and in the coastal zone ... On this expedition we can get accurate information on the spread of radionuclides," scientist Stanislav Shabelev told state-run RIA Novosti on Wednesday.

Initial samples of water, air, soil and maritime life taken from around the Kurils will be analyzed onboard the expedition's vessel, though the final results will be obtained after being sent to St. Petersburg's Radium Institute, Shabelev added.

While not the first expedition of its kind — the first two were held in 2011 and 2012 — the expedition head seemed to be aware of the sensitive nature of Russian visits to the Kurils, which are also claimed by Japan, saying all research would be conducted in international waters, beyond Japan's 200-mile economic zone.

Japan on Wednesday issued a new round of sanctions against Russia over its policy on Ukraine, while condemning the Kremlin's chief of staff visit to the disputed islands, known as the Northern Territories in Japan.

"It hurts Japanese people's feelings and is extremely regrettable," Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga was quoted as saying by Reuters, adding Japan would lodge a protest with Russia over the move.

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