

Fukui governor gives approval to retool controversial Monju

Great news

The Japan Times
February 7, 2005

Fukui Gov. Issei Nishikawa said Sunday he has approved a plan to retool the troubled Monju fast-breeder nuclear reactor -- a necessary step if operations are to be resumed following a 1995 sodium leak accident.

Nishikawa told science minister Nariaki Nakayama that he backs the central government's plan to seek resumption of the reactor.

Nakayama said, "I am very grateful for the governor's decision."

The fast-breeder reactor in the city of Tsuruga, run by the governmental Japan Nuclear Cycle Development Institute, has been shut down since the sodium leak sparked a fire Dec. 8, 1995.

The central government plans to convey the governor's decision this week to the institute, which would immediately launch preparations for the remodeling work. The national government approved the remodeling plan in January 2004.

The experimental reactor is designated by the government as a prototype for future reactor models that would play a key part in the national nuclear fuel recycling policy, under which plutonium will be produced through spent-fuel reprocessing.

By using plutonium-uranium mixed oxide (MOX) fuel, fast-breeder reactors like Monju are supposed to be able to produce more plutonium than they consume.

Nishikawa set conditions for approving the remodeling. These were building a nuclear power research center in Fukui and extending the Hokuriku Shinkansen Line through the prefecture.

Fukui Prefecture hosts a total of 15 nuclear reactors, including some in commercial operation and those for prototype projects like Monju. Nishikawa, who took office in April 2004, has repeatedly suggested that Fukui deserves rewards like shinkansen construction for cooperating with the central government's nuclear energy policy.

Talks between Fukui Prefecture and the national government were suspended after an August accident at Kansai Electric Power Co.'s Mihama nuclear plant, in which five maintenance workers were killed by superheated steam escaping from a corroded pipe.

But the central government approved building a bullet train station in Fukui late last year, and compiled an outline for the research center in January, for which 1.9 billion yen was allocated in the fiscal 2005 budget.

During Sunday's talks, Nakayama told the Fukui governor that the government considers Monju as the core facility of the nuclear research center. "I understand that the ministry, as the government body in charge of Monju, has shown a very responsible position" over the matter, Nishikawa told the minister.

The remodeling work is estimated to take 17 months and cost 18 billion yen. Monju's operator plans to install equipment that will detect sodium leaks and improve the piping systems so sodium coolant can be drained quickly in the event of an accident.

However, steps to restart Monju's operation could run counter to a Nagoya High Court ruling in January 2003 that nullified a 1983 government decision approving construction of the Monju reactor in the first place.

In the ruling, the court's Kanazawa branch supported a claim by 32 plaintiffs that the 1995 massive sodium coolant leak resulted from shortcomings in the safety assessment prior to construction.

The Supreme Court plans to hold a session in March to discuss the government's appeal of the high court ruling.