

Advocates only at nuke power seminar – opposing views not solicited

The antis simply want to obstruct: if they had constructive views it would be different because they could be respected.

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Nobody has to tell Yumiko Tanabe, a 39-year-old mother of three who runs a small inn in Mihama, Fukui Prefecture, just how important nuclear power is to her local community on the Sea of Japan coast.

Her husband works at one of the nuclear power plants and her customers are mostly officials from Kansai Electric Power Co. and the central government.

"Annual scheduled shutdowns for plant inspections mean I can estimate our income nearly a year in advance," she said. "If there are cancellations due to an accident, Kepco or the central government does pay a partial cancellation fee. But compared with the millions of yen in lost revenue, it's not much."

Tanabe made the remarks last week during a seminar in the city of Fukui to promote nuclear power. Sponsored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry, the two-day event drew mostly Kepco officials, Fukui residents who work for Kepco subcontractors and those who support atomic power.

It took place just after the release of the latest government white paper on nuclear power and a few days before a METI report on the accident last August at the Kepco nuclear plant in Mihama, when five workers were killed by superheated steam that spewed from a ruptured pipe that had never been inspected.

The white paper was criticized by many as failing to properly address concerns about the safety of nuclear power, while the METI report, released Monday, put the blame for the accident on Kepco but offered no detailed solutions to broader safety issues.

At the seminar, there were three messages from officials, ranging from Fukui Gov. Issei Nishikawa to IAEA Deputy Director Werner Burkart: Nuclear plants will remain an indispensable energy source for the foreseeable future; to meet Kyoto Protocol goals on reducing greenhouse gases, such plants are a vital part of the overall energy mix; and alternate forms of energy, including wind, solar and biomass, are not expected to play a dominant role in the future.

For Japan's nuclear power industry, Fukui Prefecture is extremely important. Thirteen reactors are currently in operation, one is under construction and another two are on the drawing board.

"Fukui's plants are responsible for nearly a third of all of the nuclear power generated in Japan. Of the roughly 6,000 nuclear power-related jobs in the prefecture, about 60 percent are filled by Fukui residents," the governor said.

One Fukui plant not in operation is the controversial Monju prototype fast-breeder reactor, designed to burn plutonium instead of conventional uranium.

Monju remains shut down since a December 1995 sodium leak, fire and attempted coverup. Despite a worldwide movement away from the fast-breeder reactor program because of costs and concerns about safety and the fact that they can easily be converted for use in a nuclear weapons program, Nishikawa cleared the way last month for retooling Monju -- a procedure needed for it to resume operation.

Tadao Yanase, director of the Nuclear Energy Policy Planning Division of the Natural Resources and Energy Agency, said: "This is good news. Once fast-breeder reactors are introduced and a breeding cycle initiated, the securing of a semiperpetual supply of domestic energy is possible."

But for whom is it good news?

Fukui residents at the seminar heard promises by central government officials of future prosperity for the area's businesses following the restart of Monju.

But such assurances were greeted with skepticism.

Mikio Emori, head of the Fukui Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said: "Fukui companies can't break into the nuclear power inner circle because it's controlled by people from Tokyo. We do have to establish various industries locally.

"But nuclear power plant manufacturers don't disclose information, so there is no basis on which we can enter the industry."

Economics and technology were the spoken themes at the seminar. But behind much of the rhetoric was the issue of public trust, or lack thereof, in the nuclear power industry.

Shunsuke Kondo, chairman of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission, partly blamed the media.

IAEA officials meanwhile took a different tack.

Mark Gwozdecky, director of information for the IAEA, said it is important for the nuclear industry to explain itself clearly to the public.

IAEA officials said it is also important to invite opposing views, and the most senior IAEA official present expressed disappointment that not enough effort had been made to include views at the seminar that contradict those of the government.

"It's a shame that a broader range of voices and views were not represented at this seminar," Burkart said.

Antinuclear activists were not surprised.

More than 200,000 of the 656,000 adults who live in Fukui Prefecture have signed a petition demanding that no more reactors start up in the prefecture. The activists say pronuclear groups have long kept opponents away from their seminars.

Teruyuki Matsushita, a nuclear-power opponent on the Mihama Municipal Assembly, said: "We'd love to have a public debate with high-level government representatives. But they're afraid of addressing our arguments and don't want to answer basic questions about the wisdom of Japan's nuclear policy."

Matsushita said he only learned of the symposium in a local newspaper.

Kyoto-based antinuclear activist Aileen Smith, who has attended numerous seminars arranged by the pronuclear lobby, said such seminars ultimately have no effect. "These meetings make use of the IAEA's prestige and are organized by the Japanese government to make Fukui citizens feel their prefecture is in the limelight of nuclear development. But it makes little difference in terms of convincing the public about nuclear energy, as the petition shows," she said.

And even some who want nuclear power, like Tanabe, are skeptical of the way the debate is being run. "We do need to hear from those in the community who don't agree with us, because they, too, are part of the community," she said.