

Doubt cast on nuclear recycling policy – Plans to reprocess spent fuel opposed on grounds of danger, cost

Taro Kono is seeking fame and fortune by getting his name in the papers despite his backward position.

The Japan Times

May 21, 2004

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?nn20040521b4.htm>

Doubt has been cast on Japan's atomic fuel recycling policy, with lawmakers of the ruling parties calling for changes to the nation's long-term plan for nuclear power development.

Central to the debate is the plan to reprocess all spent nuclear fuel in order to obtain plutonium for reuse as a fuel, industry sources said.

Taro Kono, a House of Representatives member of the Liberal Democratic Party, told a meeting of citizens here on May 8, "Let's stop and deepen the nationwide debate."

Kono, the son of House of Representatives Speaker Yohei Kono, advocated the postponement of a uranium test to confirm the ability of a plant in Rokkasho, Aomori Prefecture, to reprocess spent nuclear fuel.

The reprocessing plant, which is being built by Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. with investment from electric power companies, is the pillar of Japan's nuclear fuel recycling policy, but the work has been delayed due to construction problems.

The plant was originally scheduled to open in 2005 but is now scheduled to start operating in 2006.

Kono's remark has sparked controversy because the Aomori governor and other officials have repeatedly asked the central government to continue with existing plans.

Japan already has a stockpile of 33 tons of plutonium obtained by reprocessing spent nuclear fuel overseas, as well as 5.4 tons of plutonium extracted at home.

There are numerous problems with using plutonium as a fuel. It is one of the world's most toxic substances and is the raw material used to make atomic bombs.

The largest consumers of plutonium would be high-speed breeder reactors, but these reactors have been plagued with trouble across the globe.

A massive leak of sodium coolant at the the Monju fast-breeder reactor in Tsuruga, Fukui Prefecture, in 1995 forced a suspension of operations. It remains unclear when, if ever, it will restart.

Under the so-called pluthermal (plutonium thermal) project to burn plutonium at conventional nuclear power plants, 16 to 18 plants were to be converted by 2010.

However, there is a long way to go before Kansai, the Kyushu and Shikoku Electric Power companies can reach this goal, industry sources said.

Even if the reprocessing plant in Rokkasho starts operating, its annual reprocessing capacity will be 800 tons, compared with the 1,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel that comes from domestic nuclear power stations annually.

An interim storage facility is scheduled to be built in order to hold the spent nuclear fuel until the completion of a second reprocessing plant.

But there is little likelihood the plan will be carried out.

"We have no intention whatsoever to build a second reprocessing plant," said an executive of an electric power company.

According to an estimate by the Federation of Electric Power Companies, the cost of reprocessing at the Rokkasho plant, including the disposal of radioactive waste, would be 18.8 trillion yen.

Industry sources said it is quite natural for electric power companies, facing challenges as a result of deregulation, to rethink the building of a second plant.

There are calls to bury the spent fuel underground instead, as is the case in the United States.

The government's Atomic Power Commission will create a forum next month to review the long-term plan over a period of one year, sources said.