

2002 secret meeting: “Japan’s bid to reprocess all of its nuclear waste domestically was saddled with problems from the outset”

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Wary of criticism, officials shelved withdrawal from nuclear reprocessing business

Top officials from Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) secretly met in 2002 to discuss withdrawing from a project to reprocess nuclear fuel at the Rokkasho Reprocessing Plant in Aomori Prefecture, it has been learned.

The very fact that officials met to discuss this issue is a sign that Japan’s bid to reprocess all of its nuclear waste domestically was saddled with problems from the outset. At the same time, the continued support that the project has received in spite of the doubts that government and industry officials held about its safety and economic feasibility shows a diseased side of Japan’s nuclear power policy.

Sources familiar with the project said that TEPCO executives and other parties had made frequent visits to METI and the ministry’s Agency for Natural Resources and Energy until around February 2004, seeking to withdraw from the nuclear fuel reprocessing project. In addition to ballooning construction costs and a series of problems, it was calculated in January 2004 that operation of the reprocessing plant could cost approximately 19 trillion yen.

Yet, while prospects for the plant were becoming bleaker, METI and TEPCO withheld from producing any guidelines for withdrawing as pulling out would lead to questions of responsibility for wasted money.

Another factor was the strong resistance from Japan’s “Nuclear Power Village,” the name given to supporters of nuclear power in Japan. Officials from the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy and the Cabinet Office’s Japan Atomic Energy Commission, for example, concealed diplomatic documents that arrived from Russia in October in 2002, proposing to accept Japan’s spent nuclear fuel, on the grounds that this could hinder domestic factory operations.

One former senior METI official learned about the existence of the Russian proposal for the first time in a Nov. 24 report in the Mainichi Shimbun newspaper.

“If we had been aware of the proposal, we could have suggested transporting nuclear fuel to Russia, and a path for pulling out of the project may have opened,” the official lamented.

As a result, the reprocessing project has continued, and the 19 trillion yen has been tacked on to industrial and home power bills. When considering that the money businesses are spending on

electricity ends up being added to the prices of the products they produce, the financial burden on each person in Japan works out at about 150,000 yen.

The reprocessing factory that members of the public are being made to fund is still not operating — a fact that further highlights the failed nature of the project.

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<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/12/02/20111202p2a00m0na002000c.html>

TEPCO director opposed nuclear fuel recycling at industry body meeting

A Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) board member repeatedly voiced opposition to a nuclear fuel recycling project during an industry organization meeting sometime around 2002, it has been learned.

“Reprocessing is costing too much money, so we’re strongly opposed to the project,” the TEPCO director was quoted by industry sources as saying during a meeting of the Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan (FEPC). Around the time, top officials of TEPCO and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) were secretly negotiating withdrawal from a spent nuclear fuel recycling project in the Aomori Prefecture village of Rokkasho.

Pointing out a series of technical problems at the Rokkasho reprocessing plant, the director reportedly said, “Spent nuclear fuel shouldn’t be reprocessed until the technology has been proven, and instead it can be stored at pools.”

Power supplier executives present at the meeting did not reach any agreement on the issue as some insisted that the project be continued. “Even though the project is expected to cost a lot of money at present, we should continue it in an effort to develop the technology,” one executive was quoted as telling the gathering.

One of the attendees, a high-ranking official of a member company, said, “The TEPCO executive loudly insisted that we should withdraw from the project. However, I didn’t express support for this idea since we had invested so much money in the project.”

However, he said he now believes that power suppliers can’t spend any more money on the project. “The reprocessing plant hasn’t been completed yet. As an electricity charge hike is now inevitable, it’s difficult to invest any more money in the nuclear fuel recycling project.”

Since shares in Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd., the operator of the reprocessing plant, are owned by major power suppliers — most of them members of the FEPC — issues relating to the operation of the reprocessing plant are occasionally discussed at meetings of the industry organization, according to the METI.

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<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/12/03/20111203p2a00m0na006000c.html>

