

Opinion-gathering Hearings Held in Aomori, Fukushima

On August 18 and 19, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) held hearings in Aomori City and Fukushima City, respectively, to gather opinions from the public concerning the draft of the Fundamental Principles for Nuclear Policy Program.

The aim of the hearings was to let members of the public air their thoughts about the new draft, which was drawn up and presented at the regular meeting of the new Long-Term Program Council on July 28. Another purpose was to reflect the opinions and requests raised therein in future meetings of the conference. Attendees at the hearing from AEC included AEC Chairman Shunsuke Kondo. Despite the fact that the meeting was held on a weekday, the venue for the hearing was packed with people, whose opinions were duly heard. Other similar hearings will be held in Saga, Fukui, and Tokyo, scheduled through August 26.

The new program, intended to replace the current Long-Term Program for Nuclear Development and Utilization, charts out the basic direction to be taken by national ministries and agencies over the next few decades in relation to nuclear policy. As such, it forms what might be called the "skeleton" or "framework" for Japan's nuclear policy. Deliberations have been taking place about the new program ever since June 2004, and the draft of the program was released at the 31st meeting of the council on July 28. (See the July 28 article entitled "Council Releases Draft of Fundamental Principles for Nuclear Policy Program.")

At the hearing, Chairman Kondo started out by making an explanation of the draft program, after which the participants in the audience were asked to raise their hands and make statements. Altogether the hearing lasted two hours and a half.

The opinions raised at both the Aomori and Fukushima hearings primarily concerned the issues of regional revitalization (including coexistence between nuclear facilities and their surrounding communities), energy education, the transmission of accurate information, and the desire for "the national government to come forward and take the lead" regarding the program. The general mood at both venues thus seemed to be largely supportive of the program.

However, there were also some negative opinions brought up, including a feeling of distrust about aging facilities and the viability of the nuclear fuel cycle. In addition, several opinions highlighted the difficulty of getting the right wording down in the draft. Specifically, citing the statement in the draft describing "the idea of safety in depth, with multiple safeguards set in place based on that premise that people make mistakes, and machines break down," some members of the audience pointed out that "that's not how the company explained it" (the company having said it was safe), and "unless it's totally perfect, we ought to quit nuclear power."

There will be three such opinion-gathering hearings nationwide in addition to the Aomori and Fukushima meetings. To download movie clips of the proceedings at each meeting, go to the Atomic Energy Commission of Japan's Web site at <http://aec.jst.go.jp/>.

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