

JNFL President Talks about Enrichment and Reprocessing at Press Conference

At a regular press conference held on November 24 in Aomori City (Aomori Prefecture), Pres. Isami Kojima of Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. (JNFL), spoke on various subjects, including the progress of active testing at the reprocessing plant and the development plan for an advanced centrifugal separator.

Noting that his organization had begun to produce uranium-plutonium powder in the second stage of the active testing at the reprocessing plant, the president said, "We will accept full-scope safeguards and inspections under the IAEA agreement, and continue working on the cycle project, while maintaining and ensuring transparency and highly proliferation-resistant nuclear technology." He went on to say, "In the same spirit, we have renewed our determination to contribute to dealing with the issues of energy resources and global warming."

Admitting that the overall progress of the second stage had slowed down somewhat, Pres. Kojima said that the first shearing of 57 BWR fuel assemblies was completed on November 20. Combined with the shearing of PWR assemblies that was performed earlier, the sufficiency of shearing capability has thus been confirmed, he said.

Referring to JNFL's uranium enrichment facility, which began operation 14 years ago, the president said the company was discussing the timing of shutting down the RE-2A unit currently in operation.

JNFL has been steadily adding units with capacities of 150,000 SWU/y to the enrichment facility. With a final target of 1,500,000 SWU/y, there are currently seven such units, three of which are in operation. Production at the other four units has been suspended, since growing numbers of centrifugal separators have had to be shut down. Under those circumstances, if another unit is taken out of service, Japan's ability to produce enriched uranium will be reduced to just 300,000 SWU/y.

Pres. Kojima then spoke about the advanced centrifugal separator currently under development, the aim of which is to restore the ability to produce enriched uranium. The development of candidate successor separators has been under way for a long time, since 2000, and JNFL decided upon the final specifications of a single separator in February. The company is now working on the production of separators for cascade testing – the final stage of development – and is also preparing for the installation of equipment and other things. At the same time, it is working on various other issues, including the development of mass-production technology to pare enrichment costs to a level that is competitive internationally. The cascade testing will commence at the beginning of the upcoming fiscal year (i.e., after April 1, 2007).

According to the commercialization plan thereafter, the production of advanced centrifugal separators will begin around FY2010, allowing a ratcheting-up of enrichment capability to 1,500,000 SWU/y over a decade-long period, as was originally planned. Advanced centrifugal separators will be installed in the same position as the separators that they replace, so that existing facilities are utilized as much as possible.

Before the shut-down separators are taken away, the uranium adhering inside them will be removed. JNFL is now considering constructing a facility within the uranium enrichment plant for that purpose.

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