

Second Stage of Hearings Held on Construction of MOX Plant

On September 6, a public hearing was held in Rokkasho-mura (Aomori Prefecture) about the plan by Japan Nuclear Fuel Ltd. (JNFL) to build a MOX fuel fabrication plant (J-MOX, maximum capacity of 130tHM/y) there. Earlier, in June, the Nuclear Safety Commission (NSC), having received advice and consultation about the project from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), had solicited opinions and questions from residents of the local community, and planned the hearing with the aim of making allowance for a second-stage review.

This time, opinions and questions were rounded up from the whole of Aomori Prefecture, and 13 people were selected to appear at the hearing to express their views in a public forum. Altogether some 160 persons were attendance. There were no significant protest demonstrations held in the vicinity of the hearing.

Many of the questions raised by the persons making statements at the hearing dealt with the seismic safety of the facility. Other questions concerned such issues as the possibility of a crash by U.S. and Japanese fighter (an airbase is situated near the facility), anxieties about the possibility of a criticality accident, the MOX-use program, policies to promote local community, and the assurance of safety during fuel transport.

Preceding the participants' statements at the hearing, a general explanation was given by representatives of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) about the safety review. As far as seismic safety is concerned, the new guidelines employ such phrases as "doing investigation work more conscientiously," "stricter standards," and "more sophisticated methods" in relation to the investigation of active faults on site and in the vicinity, as well as demands for upgraded seismic design, and the formulation of a more sophisticated formulation of policy on standard seismic motion. Through a more detailed evaluation, then, NISA spoke about the developments leading to the appropriateness of the application by the operators.

Concerning the response to the Niigata-Chuetsu Offshore Earthquake on July 16, a focus of many of the local residents' questions, NSC said that any new knowledge or findings that would influence the operator in question would be reflected in the debates by the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Subcommittee's working committee.

Also, NSC explained that while the possibility of an aircraft crashing into the facility was "extremely slight," enough leeway had been incorporated in the protective design of the buildings and structures, based on such factors as the maximum equipped weight and optimum soaring speed of aircraft

belonging to the United States Air Force (USAF) and Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) during training sessions.

Meanwhile, in order to allay the anxiety of the residents stemming from the JCO criticality accident in 1999, in Tokai-mura, NISA said that there was a difference in the criticality safety management of nuclear reactors, where criticality is controlled, and processing facilities, where criticality must not be allowed to take place. In addition, Prof. Emeritus Shiro Matsumoto of Saitama University, speaking from an expert's perspective, explained about the so-called



“double contingency principle” in design, by which criticality could not occur unless more than two anomalies occurred simultaneously, thanks to the maintenance of the management of mass, shape and equipment location and placement.

In the press conference held after the meeting, NSC Chairman Atsuyuki Suzuki spoke about the imminent date for the start of construction of the MOX fabrication plant, declaring that the inspections would be carried out more carefully. He said, “The inspections are not taking place with the premise of promoting the project.”

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