

AEC Chairman Indicates Possible Consideration of Retrieving HLW

In an informal talk with the press on October 2 regarding the disposal of high-level radioactive waste (HLW), Chairman Shunsuke Kondo of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) expressed the view that AEC would discuss the possibility of retrieving HLW after it had been geologically disposed of.

“When thinking of all the possible risks and future technological developments,” Kondo said, “it is necessary to establish an escape route.” He went on to say, “I recognize that this subject is an important agenda item for the working committee on radioactive waste [which falls under the Electric Utility Industry Subcommittee]. However, if the committee wants the AEC to be the forum for discussing the matter again, we will do so.”

Currently, Japan basically regards geological disposal of HLW as the best means of final disposal. France, on the other hand, in its law for the radioactive waste management passed in June 2006, establishing reversible geological disposal as the basic policy.

Kondo then continued, “Although waste is to be finally disposed of in the manner that Japan is now considering, it could still be retrieved physically. In any event, it might be a century or so before the shaft is even sealed, and we of the current generation cannot make an absolute judgment. There may be some people who think that we should remain open to various options.”

In 1998, the AEC consolidated a basic concept for HLW disposal, in which it noted the need for a technological consideration of the effects of a shaft not being sealed, as well as the timing of the shaft sealing if that were to happen.

On this question, during deliberations in May 2007 on a bill to revise the final disposal law at the House of Representative's Committee on Economy, Trade and Industry, Izumi Yoshida of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) proposed considering the approach of not sealing shafts. And in deliberations last month on a proposed interim report of the working committee on radioactive waste, President Toshio Okazaki of the Japan Atomic Energy Agency (JAEA) expressed his view that “discussions should be carried out addressing whether or not [geological disposal] should be final disposal.”

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