

Next-generation LWRs Regarded as Strategic Priority

On October 29, the Council for Science and Technology Policy (CSTP) of the Cabinet Office evaluated measures related to science and technology contained in the estimated budget requests by various ministries and agencies for FY2008 (starting April 1, 2008). Six new measures were ranked "S" among the four possible ranks of S, A, B and C, including a project by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) project to subsidize the development of technologies for next-generation light water reactors (LWRs). The "S" ranking, which is the highest possible, indicates a strategic measure for which funds should be allocated, giving full consideration to the amounts requested.

The subject measures account for JPY 1,540.3 billion (38.2%) out of the total of JPY 4,033.2 billion in FY2008 estimated budget requests. It does not include fundamental expenses (i.e., grants for operations at national universities). At the meeting, CSTP evaluated new measures using the S, A, B, C priority ranking. Ongoing measures (i.e., those already evaluated by CSTP) were reviewed, with points noted for improvement.

As mentioned above, one of the new measures given the "S" ranking is METI's project to subsidize the development of technologies for next-generation LWRs. The project was deemed very important, not just from the viewpoint of the eventual replacement of existing NPPs, but also from the viewpoint of international competitiveness. It was ranked "S" -- meaning it should be promoted actively -- based on the principle of setting world standards and promoting business overseas by Japanese private companies.

Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) made several requests for FY2008, an "A" ranking was given to its request for such activities as the nuclear basic and fundamental research initiative (nuclear testing and research system reform), as well as investigations, observations and research on strain concentration zones, in the wake of the Niigata-Chuetsu Offshore Earthquake of four months ago.

CSTP expressed its overall view that R&D on technology for the fast breeder reactor (FBR) cycle, chosen as a key national technology, should be steadily promoted, recognizing it as an important technology contributing to a stable energy supply for the country in the future. Pointing out that the FBR cycle is a large-scale, long-term project, the Council called for a consideration to be made of ways to preserve and pass on the technology, as well as ways to develop human resources. It also noted the need for the early issuance of a road map showing the relative positions of, and relationships among, measures making up the project. In addition, it urged information sharing via close cooperation between MEXT and METI. Finally, CSTP pointed out the need to reinforce public involvement (PI) activities and to "listen widely to opinions" so as to obtain greater public understanding nationwide.

The priority rankings and evaluations of the measures related to science and technology will be presented to the relevant ministries and agencies, and reflected in the compilation of the budget at the end of the year.

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