

GREEN ACTION

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Japan's Troubled Plutonium Program

Genkai Nuclear Power Plant Unit 3 Starts "Pluthermal" MOX Fuel Use 460,000 Citizens Demand Suspension---- Round-the-Clock Sit-In Begins Problems and Questions Cloud Start-Up

5 November 2009

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

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Kyoto, Japan---Japan's beleaguered "pluthermal" program, MOX (mixed plutonium-uranium oxide) fuel use in commercial power plants, got off to a troubled start at Kyushu Electric's Genkai Unit 3 Nuclear Power Plant Unit 3 in Saga Prefecture today with the use of 16 MOX fuel assemblies. Full-time operation of the reactor is scheduled to begin December 2nd.

A round-the-clock sit-in began this morning in front of Kyushu Electric headquarters in Fukuoka City and messages of support are pouring in from around the country. In less than two days 673 NGO groups signed on to protest and petition METI, Kyushu Electric, and Saga Prefecture demanding that use of MOX fuel at Genkai not go forward. The number of sign-on groups continue to grow.

See Kyushu blog for details: (*in Japanese*) <http://carnivals.blog93.fc2.com/blog-entry-43.html>

Over 460,000 citizens are demanding that use of MOX fuel at Genkai be suspended. This and Kyushu Electric's rush to start use of MOX fuel caused an unprecedented move by the Saga prefectural legislature last month to demand that the utility rescind its original 2 October start-up date, which it did.

On 28 October Japan's nuclear regulator NISA (Nuclear Industrial Safety Agency) admitted that there are no legal grounds for the government's criteria for imported fuel assembly inspection of MOX fuel. This admission was made to an Upper House Diet office. Citizens, and national and Saga prefectural legislators demanded that NISA come to Saga to explain. NISA is yet to do so.

The "pluthermal" program is one part of Japan's troubled plutonium program. The other two parts which are in deep trouble are the fast breeder program and reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel. Commercialization of the fast breeder reactor program has been delayed 8 times and is nearly 80 years behind original schedule (set for early 1970s, now set for "by 2050".) Commercial operation of the Rokkasho reprocessing plant has been delayed 17 times. Completion of active tests is now set for October 2010. However, with a dysfunctional high-level waste vitrification facility, the future of Rokkasho is murky.

On 7 October, NISA stated that it couldn't deny the possibility that the same quality fuel Kansai Electric rejected in August is in Genkai's MOX fuel. (Kansai Electric rejected one-quarter of the fuel that

had been manufactured for use in its Takahama Unit 3 and 4 reactors.) Both utilities' MOX fuel was fabricated at Areva's MELOX plant in Marcoule, France.

See Saga Shinbun for NISA admission (English translation available from Green Action):

<http://www.sagas.co.jp/news/saga.0.1439726.article.html>

Subsequently, Kyushu Electric refused to disclose pertinent information concerning its self-inspection criteria, stating that Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, their principle contractor for MOX fuel fabrication would not allow the disclosure. (The same kind of information has been released by Kansai Electric and their principle contractor Nuclear Fuel Industries, Ltd.) Kyushu Electric stated that MELOX assured them that Kyushu's MOX fuel had no problems like the one found in Kansai Electric MOX fuel, but the utility admitted they were not shown data to confirm this was correct. The concentration of plutonium in Genkai's MOX fuel is unprecedented and exceeds even that used in France.

German nuclear authorities (BMU) initiated an investigation after Kansai Electric's rejection of Areva MOX fuel. BMU is reported to take the issue seriously. The status of the investigation is unknown.

"The Japanese government spends 64% of its R&D for energy on nuclear. This program to utilize plutonium is the biggest stumbling block to development of renewable energy and energy efficiency in Japan. Prime Minister Hatoyama is woefully ignorant about this reality. The new government must become aware that this detrimental program is merely a lobbyist and bureaucratic haven. It should shut down the program immediately," stated Aileen Mioko Smith, executive director of Green Action.

The shipment of MOX fuel for use at Genkai and two other plants which took place this spring did not meet MLIT (Ministry of Land, Transport and Infrastructure) requirements. On 26 February, twenty Diet members signed on to an open letter addressing this concern. One of them includes the current MLIT minister Seiji Maehara, and, two other ministers in the Hatoyama government. Future shipments cannot meet this requirement (MOX fuel cask drop test) at this point.

In April a report commissioned by 70 nuclear free local authorities in the UK found that the British-flagged vessels which transport the MOX fuel from Europe to Japan have serious design flaws. Japan's program is dependent on these shipments since there is no commercial MOX fuel plant in Japan to supply electric utilities. Japanese nuclear transports are protested by dozens of en route countries.

Japan's pluthermal program start-up is a decade behind schedule due to a quality control data falsification scandal of Kansai Electric MOX fuel in 1999, citizen protest, nuclear inspection data falsification by Tokyo Electric in 2002, etc. In June electric utilities announced a multi-year delay in the deadline to use MOX fuel in 16-18 reactors, originally scheduled for 2010.

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