

NRA seeks new operator for Monju reactor; decommissioning likely

①Japan's nuclear regulator told the science ministry to find a new operator for the problem-plagued Monju prototype fast-breeder reactor in Fukui Prefecture, or face the possibility of the facility being decommissioned.

Finding a new operator could prove immensely difficult as the prototype reactor has been inoperative most of the time since construction was completed in 1991.

Once heralded as offering a dream energy source, fast-breeder technology is no longer being pursued by many advanced economies.

②Monju has become a huge drain on public funds, gobbling up 1 trillion yen (8.33 billion) to date. In issuing its recommendation Nov. 13, the Nuclear Regulation Authority called on Hiroshi Hase, the minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology, to remove the government-affiliated Japan Atomic Energy Agency as Monju operator. The science ministry was given about six months to find a new operator. If none is found, the NRA suggested that a comprehensive review be conducted on Monju's status.

③Hase was handed the recommendation directly from NRA Chairman Shunichi Tanaka, who said, "I do not believe it will be an easy task to designate a specific new body to replace (JAEA)." The NRA recommendation laid out the history behind the JAEA and its predecessor bodies being forced to repeatedly come up with new ideas to deal with the mass of problems that beset Monju. The recommendation said, "It has gone beyond the stage where individual corrections are all that are needed."

④It also concluded that the JAEA "did not have the capability to operate (Monju) safely." The recommendation was the first such issued by the NRA since its establishment in 2012 following the triple meltdown at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant triggered by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami disaster.

The recommendation said that appropriate measures were needed as soon as possible, given the NRA's concerns about securing Monju's safety. ⑤Factors cited were that it is similar to a small nuclear power plant and uses as a coolant sodium that triggers a violent reaction with water as well as the aging of the facilities and the possibility of a decline in the technological skills to deal with the reactor.

Hase signaled he would move quickly to try to find a new operator for the Monju.

"This contains an issue pertaining to a basic policy of Japan so I intend to deal with the matter by

coordinating with the other relevant agencies," Hase said.

⑥Monju was at one time considered the central element of the government's program to recycle spent nuclear fuel. However, the repeated failures it encountered led to a switch in the government's nuclear program to one using a mixed-oxide fuel that mixes uranium with plutonium extracted from spent nuclear fuel.

Finding a new operator will be anything but easy. For one thing, the JAEA is the only organization with any experience of operating a fast-breeder reactor. Perhaps the only option would be electric power companies or manufacturing companies that were involved in technological development with the Monju project. However, the business risks would be huge for any company taking on the task.

⑦A former high-ranking JAEA official noted that electric power companies "have their hands full with resuming operations at nuclear power plants or dealing with the issue of extending the operating life of nuclear plants beyond the 40-year limit. It is difficult to think of any replacement operator." NRA's Tanaka also said that an organizational shakeup at JAEA would not be sufficient to fulfill his agency's recommendations.

The move by the nuclear watchdog body stemmed from the discovery in 2012 that the JAEA failed to conduct proper safety checks on about 10,000 pieces of equipment at Monju. Even after the JAEA received an order from the NRA banning it from preparing for resumption of operations, new cases of lack of oversight came to light.

⑧The NRA recommendation is not legally binding. However, it indicated it would take harsher measures in the future, such as revoking Monju's approval of installment, if the recommendation was ignored.

Toshio Kodama, JAEA president, issued a statement on Nov. 13 which said: "It is the responsibility of the JAEA to produce results through Monju. We will put every effort into a thorough improvement in order to fulfill our responsibility." [November 14, 2015 / THE ASAHI SHIMBUN]

②gobble up がつがつ食う③beset (…に) 付きまとう, 悩ます
gobble up 使い[買い]尽くす ⑤coolant 冷却剤 sodium ナトリウム pertain (…に) 関係する (to) ⑥mixed-oxide fuel 混合酸化物燃料(ウランとプルトニウムの酸化物が緊密に混合された核燃料) anything but 少しも…でない ⑧revoke 取り消す

★Ice breaker for active discussion★

1. Please give your short summary of the article.
2. What do you think about the "fast-breeder" technology?
3. What's the difference between fast-breeder technology and common nuclear reactors?
4. Why is it difficult to find a new operator?
5. Do you think Japan should pursue the operation of the Monju reactor? Why or why not?
6. Make sentences using the following words: gobble, beset, pertain and revoke.