Japan: A look at its future

by Gregg M. Taylor

With one of the largest nuclear power programs in the world, Japan is looking ahead to doubling the number of its power reactors by the year 2010, although industry and government officials admit that the pace of construction necessary to reach this goal may be difficult to achieve. Japan also plans to burn reprocessed plutonium in light water reactors (LWRs) and—in the next century—commercial fast breeder reactors (FBRs).

The planned recycling of plutonium, intended to avoid creation of a large stockpile and to use energy resources more efficiently, has sparked some international opposition. And the siting of new nuclear plants in Japan has become more difficult because of local opposition in some areas.

In separate interviews, Nuclear News talked to two Japanese nuclear industry executives—at the Japan Atomic Industrial Forum (JAIF) and Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco)—for an update on the nuclear future in Japan.

Public opinion

For nuclear power, “the prospect here is not bad, compared to other countries,” said Kazuhisa Mori, executive managing director of JAIF, in Tokyo. “Although we cannot say that everything seems to be very smooth for the future, at least compared to a couple of years ago, the situation has been improving gradually.”

Speaking in a typical Japanese poetic analogy, Ryo Ikegame, executive vice president of Tepco, reflected that “it rained after Chernobyl, and now it’s cloudy—but we can see the sunny part of the sky. I’m rather optimistic about the future of nuclear power plants [here], because Japan has no oil, no coal, no gas—so we have to depend on nuclear, and this is good for the environment.”

Siting of nuclear plants in Japan can have difficulties, Mori said. “The problem is that in various areas of the country where siting seems to be rather easy, there is no urgent need for such facilities.” In fact, “the local assemblies or local parliaments are passing bills to try to attract additional plants to existing sites.” On the other hand, “in some other regions where additional plants are urgently required, it seems that siting for new sites is getting difficult.”

Ikegame noted that, “of course, some people are against nuclear, but others are against fossil-fired plants because they will produce NOx, SOx, and CO2.”

In an August 1991 JAIF poll of Japanese citizens, 70 percent considered nuclear power generation to be necessary, Mori said. “When they were asked if they think nuclear power will be safe, somewhere between 47 and 48 percent of them answered that they had apprehension about safety. So, in the past year, the general population’s apprehension about the safety of nuclear power generation has not been greatly improved.”

Mori said that two plant incidents at Japanese units—the disintegration of a recirculation pump bearing in January 1989 at Tepco’s Fukushima Daini-3, and a steam generator tube rupture and emergency core cooling system (ECCS) actuation in February 1991 at Kansai Electric Co.’s Mihama-2—“were just a reliability problem, not a safety problem.” Nonetheless, he noted, “it was reported as if those incidents, reliability problems, directly threatened safety, and that was the way they were perceived by the general public.”

As a result of this misunderstanding by the public, Mori said, persons in the nuclear power industry are asking themselves if they should provide the public with a consistent and logical explanation of what is really meant by safety. “Twenty years ago, we used to say, ‘nuclear power plants are safe because if anything goes slightly wrong, the system will stop—therefore nuclear power plants are safe.’ But recently, because capacity factors have been very efficient, it’s been said that Japanese power plants are safe because they don’t stop.” In the Mihama-2 incident, for example, “the ECCS worked, the reactor stopped, and therefore in the older way of interpretation safety was ensured. But in the recent way of people’s thinking, if the emergency system worked and the reactor stopped, it was a major safety problem.”

Mori observed that “certain political opponents are taking advantage” of the public’s apprehensions about nuclear power. For instance, if they do not like an incumbent mayor, they use opposition to nuclear power to prevent him from being associated with any major achievements, such as construction of a nuclear plant. In another context, Mori noted that when mayoral candidates who oppose nuclear power are elected, “quite often those candidates turn out to be a very reliable mayor—even from the viewpoint of the utilities.”

Dealing with nuclear

Unlike the United States, which has state-level public utility commissions for rate regulation of nuclear and other...
power plants, “we don’t have any pre-
fecture-level regulation,” Ikegame
explained.
However, he said, the consent of the
prefecture governor is required by law
for construction of a power plant. “Re-
cently, the governor of Shizuoka Prefec-
ture opposed the construction of a ther-
mal plant in Shimizu City, which is a ter-
itory of Chubu Electric,” he said. Al-
though the city had agreed to the plant,
because of the governor’s opposition,
plans for building the unit were canceled.

Before submitting a formal application
to get site approval for a new power
plant, a Japanese utility will work ear-
nestly to develop a positive consensus
with area residents and local govern-
ment. The process is an example of the
Japanese tradition of seeking harmony in
the implementation of a project. “This is
the most difficult part of the entire licen-
sing procedure,” commented Ikegame.

Electricity rates in Japan are governed
by the Ministry of International Trade
and Industry (MITI). Ikegame said.
“Every time we want to change the rate
base, then the government [MITI] will
say that ‘you can reduce the cost.’”

Mori said that persons in the nuclear
business tend to listen just to people
“who are nice to them,” and it seems dif-
ficult for utilities to listen to those who
are critical. “They turn away from those
people who tend to become their ene-
mies.” He suggested that this “at-
titudinal problem” on the part of the nu-
clear business and utilities is an area for
improvement.

“In my personal opinion, we often say
that the public are misled, that there is
misreporting on the part of the newspa-
ers,” Mori continued. “That might be
true, but on the other hand, we must also
admit that kind of attitudinal problem on
the part of utilities or people in the
nuclear business.”

In response to concerns about the pub-
lic perceptions of nuclear power, Kansai
Electric announced last February the cre-
ation of the Institute of Nuclear Safety
Systems, Inc., an independent company
wholly owned by the utility. The institute
will conduct studies and R&D on safety
engineering at nuclear plants, and on
how to harmonize nuclear power gener-
ation with society. In its third-party role,
it will also strictly monitor Kansai’s safety
approach.

The utility’s intention is for institute
activities to improve nuclear power plant
reliability and restore public confidence
in nuclear energy, in the wake of the
Mihama-2 incident.

The institute announced that its chair-
man would be Shoichiro Kobayashi,
chairman of Kansai, and the president
and director-general would be Nobuaki
Kumagai, former president of Osaka
University. A Nuclear Safety System
Advisory Committee, of about 15
authorities in engineering and the
humanities, will advise the director-gen-
eral. There will also be an Overseas
Advisory Committee, chaired by Lord
Marshall of Goring, chairman of the
governing board of the World Associ-
ation of Nuclear Operators. Two small
research institutions will be set up, focus-
ing respectively on social and technical
areas, for researchers from Japan and
abroad.

Nuclear goals
An Atomic White Paper, released by
the Atomic Energy Commission of Japan
and then approved by the Cabinet in Oc-
tober 1990, set targets for the country’s
nuclear capacity of 50.5 GWe by the year
2000, and 72.5 GWe by 2010. In 1990,
Japan had 39 operating nuclear units,
and to meet the 2010 goal, about 40 units
would have to be built in the following 20
years—an average of two completed each
year.

It would be difficult to meet the goal
for 2010, Mori said. But, he added, this
also will be the case for the 30 million-
kiloton-equivalent goal set for 2010 for
new non-nuclear energy sources, such
as solar, geothermal, and wind power.

The calendar 1991 average capacity
factor for the 41 commercial nuclear
power units in Japan (with a total capac-
ya of 33.239 GWe), was 73.5 percent,
and the availability factor was 74.6 per-
cent, according to MITI. In 1990, the av-
gerage capacity factor of the 39 units oper-
ing then was 71.2 percent.

In calendar 1991, the capacity factor
was 76.1 percent for boiling water re-
actors (21 units), 70.2 percent for pres-
surized water reactors (19 units), and
65.1 percent for one gas-cooled reactor.
The BWR statistic was 8 percent better
than the previous year because all 13
BWRs of Tepco were fully operable
throughout the summer. The PWR figure
was 5.1 percent lower than in 1990 be-
cause of the Mihama-2 steam generator
tube rupture and resulting inspections
of steam generators at several units.

Recycling fuel
Plutonium, reprocessed from spent
fuel from Japanese nuclear plants by
BNFL in Great Britain and Cogema in
France, is to be burned into ura-
nium-plutonium mixed-oxide (MOX)
fuel, and burned in Japanese reactors.
Uranium also will be recycled. Ikegame
said there will be a shipment of
plutonium from Europe to Japan this
year. Nuclear industry officials in Japan
stress that the purpose of recycling is to
reduce the level of the stockpile of
plutonium returned to Japan.

Mori said that without recycling, by
the year 2010, Japan would be consuming
10 to 20 percent of the total world ura-
nium production. “Our concern is not
vulnerability—it is that we might be dis-
turbing the marketplace,” he explained.
“We should try to control our consump-
tion to 5 to 10 percent at most. And ex-
ploration activity alone can be disruptive
to the environment, built for the pur-
pose. The lightly armed ship is operated
by Japan’s civilian Maritime Safety
Agency, similar to the U.S. Coast
Guard. The Japanese navy is banned by
the country’s constitution from operating
more than 1000 miles (about 1600 km)
from Japanese shores.

Shipments by air has been denied by
the U.S. Congress. Under a 1988 agree-
ment, U.S. approval is required for ship-
ment of plutonium derived from uranium
fuel from the United States used in
Japanese reactors.

Two activist groups, the Nuclear Con-
trol Institute and Greenpeace Interna-
tional, have charged in a May news con-
ference in Washington, D.C., that the
shipments would have “inadequate
safety provisions and emergency prepa-
ration.”

“The Japanese people are most strong-
ly committed to the Nuclear Nonprolif-
eration Treaty,” said Mori, “because by
nature, as a people, we are most commit-
ted to the exclusively peaceful use of nu-
clear material.” Japan is a signatory to
the NPT. “If we stockpile excessive
amounts of plutonium—although we do
not have such intention—that leads to
misunderstanding by people outside of
the country.” Ikegame said, “We are
planning not to store a significant amount
of plutonium because everybody’s very
nervous about the storage of plutonium.”

Mori said that plutonium to be burned
in LWRS is unlike that used for atomic
bombs: “LWR plutonium degrades very
quickly because it is lower in quality." It is difficult to process into bomb-grade material "because of too many impurities—we can't do that in Japan," he said, adding that perhaps countries with advanced military technology—such as the United States or Russia—could process it.

Another problem with LWR plutonium, Mori noted, is that with time, "the impurities will become radioactive, so it becomes even more difficult to reprocess after being left idle for many years. Therefore, we should get rid of surplus plutonium as soon as possible."

MOX fuel is now used at the Fugen prototype advanced thermal reactor (ATR), a 148-MWe (net), heavy-water moderated/light-water cooled, pressure-tube-type reactor, in Tsuruga, Fukui. The plant started operation in March 1979. MOX fuel is also used at the experimental Joyo FBR, a 100-MWt unit that began operation in 1978, and will be used at the Monju prototype FBR, in Tsuruga, a 280-MWe unit scheduled to start operation in early 1993. All three sites are operated by the state-owned Power Reactor & Nuclear Fuel Development Corp. (PNC), which also makes MOX fuel for them.

A 1991 advisory committee report to the AEC said that utilities should study the timing of starting overseas fabrication of MOX fuel from plutonium recovered from reprocessing there. It called such overseas fabrication appropriate for at least a transitional period. Fabrication of MOX fuel will be eventually commercialized by the Japanese private sector.

"We have to increase the use of MOX fuel gradually," said Ikegame. "Our main source of the plutonium will be Cogema and BNFL for the first 10 years. And that will be changed to the Rokkashomura reprocessing plant," a facility to be built at Rokkashomura (Rokkasho village) by the Nuclear Fuel Service Co. JNFS is a private company mostly owned by utilities, with lesser ownership by industrial and financial companies. Rokkashomura is located in Aomori Prefecture, 600 km north of Tokyo, at the northern end of Honshu island. Using the Purex process, the facility would start recovering uranium and plutonium from spent LWR fuel at the end of the century. It would reprocess plutonium for use in LWRs, ATRs, and FBRs. Local opposition has been delaying construction of the plant.

A smaller PNC reprocessing plant at Tokaimura currently recovers plutonium for use in reactor R&D, such as at the Fugen ATR.

The fast breeder reactors
An FBR uses fuel with high efficiency. Not only can an FBR "burn" plutonium, such as that in MOX fuel, but it can also—using fast neutrons—convert U-238 into plutonium, producing more fuel than it consumes. Natural uranium contains only 0.7 percent U-235, with the remaining portion being U-238, Ikegame said. "If we develop FBRs, we can use 60 times more energy from the same amount of natural uranium," he said.

The 1991 report assigns to FBRs the top priority in plutonium recycling. A demonstration FBR would be built, to start operation about 2005, according to Kansai Electric president Yoshishisa Akiyama, quoted in the January 1992 *Atoms in Japan*.

The reactor would be operated by the private sector.

The 1991 report says the aim of LWR fuel recycling is for it to have a role in the energy supply sector, and to develop the technologies and infrastructure for commercial-scale recycling, with eventual commercialization of FBRs. It also recommends that a plutonium recycling program in LWRs be implemented in the mid-1990s, based on results of demonstration programs in LWRs conducted with a small number of MOX fuel assemblies. It recommends that MOX fuel be used in the mid-1990s in ¼-reactor cores of one BWR and one PWR. It says that recycling should be gradually and systematically expanded, to load ½-reactor cores of four 1000-MWe-class LWRs with MOX fuel by the end of the 1990s, and 12 of them shortly after the year 2000.

The 1991 report estimates that plans for recycling plutonium in LWRs, ATRs, and FBRs through about the year 2010 would require 80-90 tons of fissile plutonium (Pu). It calculates that the Japanese supply of plutonium through the year 2010 will total about 85 tons of Pu—with about 5 tons coming from the Tokai reprocessing plant, about 30 tons from overseas reprocessing, and about 50 tons from the Rokkashomura reprocessing plant.

Akira Oyama, vice chairman of the AEC, said in the January 1992 *Atoms in Japan* that an estimated 20 to 30 tons of plutonium would be used in FBRs and prototype and demonstration ATRs. And if MOX recycled fuel were used in 12 LWRs at the beginning of the 21st century, about 50 tons will have been used by 2010. "Supply and demand should thus balance well in this way," he said.

"I know the spot market for uranium is very miserable—the price is very low," Ikegame said. "If we reprocess the fuel is very important—reprocessing and the use of the fuel itself. Plutonium or the recovered uranium is very important for Japan for the long term. So, we are determined to continue the development of the FBRs—but this is not for today or tomorrow," but for farther into the future.

"In the long term, we plan to recover plutonium from spent fuel and burn it as recycled fuel. This is the policy of Japan—to recycle fuel and conserve energy."
The advanced thermal reactor

The future role of the advanced thermal reactor in Japan is apparently undetermined as yet. The importance of the ATR and the extent of its use will largely depend on the economics of its operation.

The ATR, being developed primarily by Japanese technology, can use a variety of fuels, such as plutonium and depleted uranium recovered from reprocessed LWR spent fuel. If necessary, it could supply plutonium for FBR use, by using enriched uranium.

"In the case of the LWR, assuming that we will continue with the present level of technology, we have to use a combination of fuels and carefully design the position of the different kinds of fuel in the core—for only up to one-third can be plutonium," Mori said. "That is very complex and difficult to manage." In contrast, in an ATR, 100 percent can be plutonium and therefore provides "ease of operation."

A 606-MWe demonstration ATR (DATR) is planned to be built by the Electric Power Development Corp. near Ohma in Aomori Prefecture. It is to start operation about the year 2001. If the DATR "turns out to be economically viable, ATRs will have an active role to play," Mori said. The 1991 report to the AEC said the PNC will produce MOX fuel for the DATR at a new MOX fuel fabrication facility to be built at its plutonium fuel production site.

The industry

Ikegame said the nuclear industry in the United States has only a few "very strong" manufacturers and many small utilities. In Japan, he said, there are "three big manufacturers"—Hitachi, Mitsubishi, and Toshiba—which "are not strong enough to do things by themselves," and some 10 utility companies. As a result, he said, the utilities there have to assist the manufacturers in development efforts. "There are three big utility companies: Tokyo, Kansai, and Chubu," he observed. "So the leadership of the utility companies in Japan is stronger than that in the United States."

In France, Ikegame added, "there is only one manufacturer and one user." He reflected that "The leadership of the [Japanese] utility companies is stronger than that of the U.S., but less [strong] compared with France."

Mori said that in Japan, "Nowadays, the young people fresh out of college, university, or graduate school do not seem to be attracted by nuclear science anymore—so it's getting difficult to try to recruit highly qualified young people out of school for this sector of the industry."

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A view of Tokyo Electric Power Company's Kashiwazaki Kariwa nuclear power plant. From the foreground upward are Units 1 and 2 (in operation), Units 3 and 4 (under construction), Units 7 and 6 (the open area; since this photo was taken, construction has started there for both units, the first advanced boiling water reactors being built), and Unit 5 (in operation). All of Tepco's nuclear units, in operation or under construction, are BWRs. Their reactors are variously supplied by General Electric, Hitachi, and Toshiba. (Tepco photo)

Continued from page 35

He said that JAIF conducted a survey during the past year, which estimated that to respond to the industry's needs to about the year 2010, about 3 percent of engineering and science graduates need to be recruited into the nuclear energy field. A large number of them would be required by nuclear industry manufacturers, suppliers, and utilities, with fewer for R&D, Mori explained. "Three percent does not sound like a large figure, but like the autumn sky, young people's psychology is apt to change," Mori reflected, "so [someday] it might be difficult to obtain 3 percent recruitment."

PLANNING
Tokyo Electric's future: Advanced BWRs

The average capacity factor in calendar 1991 for Tokyo Electric Power Co.'s 13 nuclear units was 77.2 percent. Six units are at the Fukushima Daiichi plant (ranging from 439 MWe [net] to 1067 MWe), four at Fukushima Daini (all 1067 MWe), and three at Kashiwazaki Kariwa (all 1067 MWe), where four more units are under construction.

At Kashiwazaki Kariwa, Units 3 and 4 (each 1067 MWe) will start commercial operation in July 1993 and July 1994, respectively. Units 6 and 7, rated 1315-MWe each, are the first advanced BWRs and will go commercial in July 1996 and July 1997. All of the utility's nuclear plants in operation or under construction are BWRs, with General Electric, Hitachi, and Toshiba variously the reactor suppliers

According to Tepco, the ABWR design of Kashiwazaki Kariwa-6 and -7 has numerous advantages, including:

- Improved economy—from reduced construction cost (decreased building volume and materials, and shorter construction period) and reduced operating cost (shorter refueling outages, improved thermal efficiency, and lower fuel cost).
- Enhanced operability and maneuverability—including expanded automation.
- Reduced occupational radiation exposure—from the internal recirculation pumps, use of low-cobalt material and corrosion-resistant steel, and water quality control.
- Less radioactive waste—from hollow fiber filtration in the condensate purification system, nonregeneration use of the condensate demineralizer, incineration of combustible solid materials and spent resin, and intensified volume reduction.

Compared to previous BWRs of earlier design, the utility expects that construction costs of Kashiwazaki Kariwa-6
and -7, the ABWRs being built, “will be about 10 percent less—but for the later plants the saving will be much higher,” said Ryo Ikegame, Tepco executive vice president. Contracts for the main components were awarded to an international joint venture of General Electric, Hitachi, and Toshiba. Operating costs will be less, too, Ikegame added, because the units will require fewer maintenance personnel.

Speaking about Tepco’s operating units, Ikegame said that the utility is talking to MITI to see if it can extend operating cycles. To do that, however, the law requiring annual inspection of reactor and other systems has to be revised by the Japanese Diet, he said. And, politically speaking, making a change “is rather difficult,” especially in the upper house, he explained.

North of Rokkashomura, along the east coast, in a rural area called Higashidoriomura, a site has been jointly purchased by Tepco and Tohoku Electric Co. for future nuclear plant construction. “We are planning to build four units [there]—two each for Tokyo Electric and Tohoku,” said Ikegame. But this site is not ready because the local fishermen’s union is not satisfied with the compensation offer for the loss of their fishing rights near the site.

Ikegame said that “it’s highly probable” that the two units to be built there by Tepco will be of the ABWR design.

ON LINE WITH Verna
by Bernard J. Verna

Additional switchyard incidents—Part 1

As has happened many times in the past, while perusing literature in search of a subject for a new series of columns, I kept coming across a number of events that were similar to the ones described in my most recent column series. That series (NN, Jan. 1992, p. 36; Mar. 1992, p. 44; and May 1992, p. 38) described a March 1990 incident at the Vogtle station, in which a fuel-and-lubricant truck backed into a support pole for a phase insulator for a reserve auxiliary transformer. This caused an electrical fault and resulted in a loss of offsite power (LOSP). Described below and in the remainder of this new series are a number of other switchyard incidents, some of which resulted in a LOSP. The three incidents described in this column involved the use of cranes in switchyards and were summarized in Nuclear Regulatory Commission Information Notice 92-13.

Most of the following paragraph was taken from IN 92-13; entries in parentheses are from an earlier IN that included the same incident.

During a March 1991 refueling outage at Diablo Canyon-1, the boom of a mobile crane was positioned about 3 ft from a 500-kV transmission line (transformer lead). The resulting flashover caused protective relaying to isolate the faulted line, and, as a result, offsite power to plant loads was interrupted. Offsite power was being supplied by backfeeding through the main output transformer (through the Unit 1 auxiliary transformers; the main generator had been disconnected from the main transformer to permit the backfeed) from the 500-kV switchyard. Two standby startup transformers (one transformer), which were the normal sources of offsite power, had been removed for service for preventive maintenance. All three diesel generators started and successfully loaded, and residual heat removal was restored in about one minute. Unit 2, which was at full power at the time, was not affected. (Offsite power was restored to the auxiliary buses five hours later by crosstying the Unit 2 standby startup transformer into the Unit 1 startup bus. The plant’s accident prevention rules contained a minimum required clearance between mobile cranes and 500-kV transmission lines of 27 ft.)

- Palo Verde-3 was shut down and in hot standby in November 1991, and a 35-ton truck-mounted crane was being used to replace the A-phase bushing on the main output transformer. The original bushing had been damaged by lightning a day earlier. Before final installation and after high-voltage testing had been completed, the bushing was returned to its shipping case. The crane operator shut down the crane motor and engaged one of several braking devices on the crane boom, and then exited the cab to discuss replacement procedures with other maintenance personnel. A wind gust caused the boom to rotate and contact one of the phases of the 13.8-kV feeder. The feeder was transmitting power from the startup transformer to various vital and non-vital loads in Train A. The electrical fault current that was generated was not large enough to cause protective devices to actuate, because the crane had not been grounded as required by plant procedure. Therefore, the feeder remained energized and the fault current initiated small asphalt fires in the areas where the crane’s front outrigger pads made ground contact. The rear outrigger pads were not extended.

The maintenance foreman contacted the shift supervisor and incorrectly identified the Train B feeder as being faulted. The shift supervisor opened the supply circuit breaker for the Train B feeder before the foreman could correct his statement. Power was interrupted to nonvital loads, including two of four reactor coolant pumps. Power to vital Train B loads was interrupted, but was reestablished following the successful start and loading of the Train B diesel generator (DG). The correct train (A) was subsequently deenergized, resulting in the start and loading of DG A and a loss of power to the two remaining reactor coolant pumps. The reactor was cooled by natural circulation for 28 min until a reactor coolant pump was started. There were no injuries to personnel.

- Fermi-2 was in cold shutdown in December 1991 and preparing for replacement of the main output transformer. A self-propelled crane, with its boom extended, attempted to turn onto a roadway that was outside the protected area but inside the owner-controlled area of the plant. While the crane spotter was directing traffic, the crane operator proceeded to turn onto the roadway. A lifting strap dangling from the end of the crane boom made momentary contact with one phase of a 120-kV transmission line that was providing offsite power to the plant. The circuit breaker for the line opened and reclosed, interrupting and reestablishing the power supply in a matter of cycles. No LOSP occurred.

When the operator stopped the crane, it came to rest with the end of the boom extended above the transmission line and with the line passing between the boom and the lifting strap. The operator then backed up the crane, and a second contact occurred between the line and the strap. Again, the circuit breaker closed and reclosed rapidly so that no actual LOSP occurred. The crane operator then informed his supervisor of the event. No personnel injuries, equipment damage, or challenges to plant safety systems occurred.

Continued on next page

NUCLEAR NEWS / JULY 1992