



Govt may concede ITER site to France

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The government may be prepared to accept the building of the planned International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor in another country providing Japan wins construction work and jobs, government sources said.

The government policy taken Tuesday is the result of recent unofficial negotiations with the European Union, which also is seeking to host the ITER. As a result, it is now highly likely that the reactor will be built in Cadarache, France, rather than at Japan's proposed site in Rokkashomura, Aomori Prefecture.

The government hopes to finish negotiating with the prefecture and the countries concerned and to reach a formal agreement next month, the sources said.

The ITER is an experimental facility of thermonuclear fusion, at which nuclear fusion reactions that occur on the sun are produced by fusing the nucleus of heavy hydrogen and tritium at more than 100 million C. As a result of the reactions, energy is produced that can be retained at the facility. It is said that the energy produced from 1 gram of fuel in the facility is equivalent to that of 8 tons of oil.

The fuel--heavy hydrogen--can be extracted from seawater, which is an inexhaustible resource. If put into practical use, the technology has the potential of drastically changing the energy market, which is currently dependent on the politically unstable Middle East.

The project participants are Japan, China, the EU, Russia, South Korea and the United States. The total project cost is expected to be about 1.3 trillion yen.

Under the original plan, construction of an experimental reactor for the project was scheduled to begin this year, and the reactor was planned to start operations in 2015. But the project has been stalled due to debate over the reactor's location, with Japan, South Korea and the United States backing Rokkashomura and China, the EU and Russia supporting Cadarache.

In June 2003, Japan and the EU, which have been bidding to host the facility, began negotiations over the roles of the facility's host country and the rest of the participating countries.

In September, Japan presented a proposal that was beneficial to the non-hosting countries, such as them being able to win orders for 20 percent of the ITER construction work by bearing 10 percent of the cost.

On April 12, EU Science and Research Commissioner Janez Potocnik also presented similar conditions as the Japanese proposal during ministerial-level talks between Japan and the EU in Tokyo, according to a senior official of the Education, Science and Technology Ministry. This has accelerated mutual concessions on both sides.

Tetsuhisa Shirakawa, the ministry's deputy minister, is currently in Europe to confirm

the agreement made during the April meeting. Japan and the EU will then work together on making a document stating the role of the ITER's host and non-hosting countries before calling for ministerial-level talks among all six countries involved, which have not been held since December 2003, to formally decide the ITER construction site.

"So far, negotiations are going in the direction that an agreement between Japan and the EU should be reached this month," the sources said, acknowledging that the negotiations are in their final phase.

On Monday, it was confirmed during a regular summit meeting between Japan and the EU held in Luxembourg that both parties should aim at reaching an agreement over the ITER's host country as soon as possible.

"We agreed that we should cooperate with each other so that we can reach an agreement over the issue as soon as possible," Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said after the meeting.



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