



Looking on bright side of losing ITER

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It looks like Cadarache in southern France has beaten out Rokkashomura, Aomori Prefecture, for the honor of hosting the hotly contested International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor.

A ministerial meeting of five countries and the European Union that are jointly developing the ITER project is expected to give the French site the green light later this month.

The Japanese government has bowed to the inevitable, officials said. In return for acquiescing, Japan is now placing priority on ensuring it receives as much as possible in the way of rewards, they said.

The split on where to build the futuristic facility came at a ministerial conference in December 2003. Japan, South Korea and the United States favored Rokkashomura, while China, the EU and Russia threw their support behind Cadarache.

Japan's bid for the site was led by the Education, Science and Technology Ministry, which saw hosting the reactor as a way of ensuring that Japan would become the world's leader in nuclear fusion energy.

The Finance Ministry, however, was skeptical about the idea, saying the cost of hosting the project would be huge.

The government was therefore far from being unified on the ITER issue from the outset.

According to sources close to the Prime Minister's Office, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi instructed then Education, Science and Technology Minister Takeo Kawamura in August to settle the ITER issue "as early as possible," even if it meant abandoning the idea of building the reactor in Rokkashomura.

Since then, the ministry has switched priorities to ways of securing rewards for forgoing the honor of hosting the reactor, the sources said.

During a vice-ministerial conference between Japan and the EU in September, Japan proposed that the country losing the ITER bid be granted rights to 20 percent of related contracts in exchange for bearing

10 percent of the project's cost.

In a Japan-EU ministerial meeting in April, the EU broadly agreed to the proposal, prompting the ministry to study details of how Japan would be able to win related contracts, the sources said.

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A six-party vice-ministerial meeting on May 5 in Geneva, adopted a set of accords concerning preferential treatment for the losing candidate, including that it be:

--Allowed to have a remote-controlled ITER experiment unit, and one for the development of super heat-resistant materials for use in constructing an ITER.

--Awarded 20 percent of procurement contracts for building the main ITER structure, and entitled to provide 20 percent of the personnel for the planned ITER administration office.

--Entitled to fill the top position of the planned body.

The agreement to allow the losing candidate to have a remote-control facility is of especially high significance, according to experts.

The remote-control facility is envisaged as playing a key role in the ITER project, as it will be able to obtain all the data from the experimental fusion reactor via fiber-optic communications.

Given that Japan's supercomputers are among the best in the world, they would be able to provide a nuclear fusion research environment as good as France's, a senior science ministry official said.

The government has also proposed that all participants in the ITER project study the advisability of using the JT-60 system used at the Japan Atomic Energy Research Institute for plasma experiments, for building an experimental fusion reactor, the official said.

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