

Japanese call for more bite in animal rules

David Cyranoski, Tokyo

Animal-welfare activists are locking horns with researchers in Japan over how strictly the use of animals in the country's labs should be controlled.

Friction has built up because the Japanese parliament is preparing an updated version of the 1973 animal-welfare law, which is expected to pass by June (see *Nature* **430**, 714; 2004). Animal-welfare campaigners want to introduce legally binding restrictions on experiments, but researchers advocate voluntary guidelines instead.

Mounting public concern has put pressure on parliament to strengthen legislation. The current system is based on "guesswork" about what is happening in laboratories, Seichi Kaneda, a member of the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan, told a hearing in Tokyo on 24 February.

At the moment, general guidelines are enforced by the environment ministry on the basis of the 1973 law. But ethical questions relating to specific experiments, such as whether animals need to be used in the way proposed by the researchers, are dealt with by the ministries funding the research.

Researchers acknowledge that the system could be improved. A representative of the Science Council of Japan (SCJ), a coalition of scientific societies, told the hearing that Japan has a reputation "as an outlaw country without rules". The representative — a neuroscientist who asked not to be identified for fear of harassment by animal-welfare groups — said that Japan should implement



Guarded optimism: campaigners hope parliament will take action.

voluntary guidelines that would cover industrial as well as academic labs.

The guidelines proposed by the SCJ would require institutions to set up committees to monitor animal experiments. They would also call for greater use of third-party accreditation of labs by bodies such as the US-based Association for Assessment and

Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International.

The SCJ says that if these guidelines were in place, there would be no need for legally binding regulation of animal experiments, which it claims might be implemented arbitrarily by local government officials.

But animal-rights groups, such as All Life in a Viable Environment (ALIVE), say that self-regulation by researchers is not enough. A survey carried out by ALIVE last September showed that most university medical departments don't even keep track of the number of animals used. "They just want to avoid any kind of accountability," says ALIVE director Fusako Nogami.

The revised law should at least contain a registration system that requires experimental facilities or researchers to inform a government authority that an experiment will be carried out, says Nogami.

Most other countries have much stricter regulations. Britain requires labs to be licensed if they do animal experiments. The United States combines legal measures (including unannounced visits that can result

in fines) with voluntary guidelines.

Japan's Democratic party hopes that negotiations with members of the ruling coalition will produce a more restrictive draft of the law. Momentum for reform is apparently strong, although the civil service and the powerful Liberal Democratic party seem to be less enthusiastic about such restrictions. ■

Agency to bring fast-breeder reactor out of mothballs

Ichiko Fuyuno, Tokyo

Japan is taking steps to restart its prototype fast-breeder nuclear reactor, which has been sitting dormant in the northern state of Fukui since an accident in 1995.

In February, the Fukui government approved plans to restart the Monju reactor, effectively giving the go-ahead for a government plan to spend ¥15 billion (US\$140 million) over the next few years to get the prototype running again.

Critics of the move point out that fast-breeder technology has been abandoned in Britain, the United States and Germany.

"It was a mistake to build the Monju reactor. It is too expensive and time-consuming," says Hitoshi Yoshioka, a specialist in the history of science and science policy at Kyushu University

and a member of Japan's Atomic Energy Commission.

However, India and China are forging ahead with fast-breeders, which use mixed oxides of plutonium and uranium as fuel and produce more fissile material than they consume. Japan's determination to press on with the project suggests that in Asian nations with limited sources of energy the technology still has a future.

"Japan needs to look for new energy resources," says Hiroshi Nunota, an official at the nuclear fuel cycle section of the education ministry, which is funding the project.

The government of Fukui had been reluctant to allow the reactor to restart following public concern about an accident in 1995, when liquid sodium coolant leaked

from the reactor's secondary cooling system.

Critics of the project claim that the state only reversed its decision after the central government agreed to provide economic packages and to link Fukui to Tokyo by bullet train.

Japan's Nuclear Cycle Development Institute has been working on the project since 1968 and its cost to date is estimated at ¥800 billion. A final obstacle to its resuming operation — a 2003 court ruling that nullified its construction permit — is likely to be overturned during the next couple of months, say energy analysts.

The institute still needs to win approval from the local government and residents before restarting the operation. But most analysts think that this approval will also be forthcoming. ■