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verview of Environmental Protection Measures in Japan

Centering on endeavors by MITI

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Photo: Brazil Tourist Board

History of environmental issues in Japan

(1) Outbreak and aggravation of environmental pollution by industry

Until recently, environmental pollution in Japan had its main cause in industrial activities, increasing and spreading as industrial development progressed.

Environmental pollution in Japan began in the mining industry at the end of the 19th century, in the incipient stages of modern industry. Even in those days, it posed a serious social problem.

Later, with the development of heavy and chemical industries at the beginning of the 20th century, people living in densely populated cities were afflicted with soot and smoke, waste water and noise from factories, and there were cases of complaints by the victims. However, because the majority of Japanese people were not yet aware of the concept of human rights and also because Japan had plunged into war, environmental pollution by industrial emissions did not become a social problem.

After World War II, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry was established. From the mid-1950s, the Japanese economy attained soaring growth. During this high-rate growth period, air pollution, water contamination, noise, and land subsidence and other types of industrial pollution grew in many parts of the country.

Minamata disease, which broke out in

Minamata City, Kumamoto Prefecture, as a result of the mercury poisoning of Minamata Bay victimized a considerable number of people and became the greatest pollution-related tragedy in Japan. In addition, there were industrial pollution-caused diseases such as Yokkaichi asthma arising from air pollution caused by fumes emitted from a cluster of petrochemical complexes, mercury poisoning in the area along the Agano River in Niigata Prefecture, and "itai-itai" disease caused by cadmium poisoning of people who lived along the Jintsu River in Toyama Prefecture. Thus, industrial pollution took on grave proportions in the 1960s.

In response to the upsurge of social demands for environmental protection, business corporations made voluntary efforts to prevent pollution and launched research and development endeavors to develop pollution control technologies.

The government actively developed pollution prevention technologies under MITI's initiative and extended various assistance, such as low-interest loans, to encourage the installation of environmental protection facilities with public funds. In 1967, the Diet enacted the Basic Law for Environmental Pollution Control to urge and encourage the implementation of pollution prevention measures by industry.

However, even as the government and the Diet were endeavoring to combat pollution, little progress was actually being made in Japan in preventing pollution. Thus, as industrial development continued, the state of the environment worsened further.

Under such circumstances, radical changes in anti-pollution administration became necessary. As a result, the Environmental Pollution Control Headquarters was set up in 1970, with the prime minister as the chairman, in order to unify the anti-pollution administration which was scattered over several ministries and agencies. Under the new system, the government submitted to the Diet in the autumn of the same year 14 environmental protection bills, including one to make a partial amendment to the Basic Law for Environmental Pollution Control. With the passage of

these bills, all necessary laws for the protection of the environment were enacted. That Diet was called the "Anti-Pollution Diet" (special Diet for anti-pollution measures), since almost all the existing laws relating to pollution were enacted by it.

In the following year, 1971, the Environment Agency was set up to undertake overall environment-related administration. In this new agency, the government unified the administration for the prevention of pollution and conservation of the environment.

During the early 1970s, the framework of laws and standards for the prevention of pollution was completed. As a result of joint endeavors by the government and industry, so much improvement was made in environmental protection in the second half of the 1970s that it was said in the 1980s that the environment in Japan had risen out from critical condition.

(2) New environmental problems arise

In the meantime, Japan experienced two oil crises, with the result that Japanese industry had to develop energy-saving technologies in addition to pollution-prevention endeavors.

MITI actively encouraged the development of energy-saving technologies and clean energy sources just as it had encouraged the development and dissemination of pollution prevention technologies and equipment earlier. It extended diverse assistance, such as the introduction of low-interest loans with public money.

Consequently, Japan overcame the oil crises by developing energy-saving technologies, and industry succeeded in lowering costs. Manufacturing industries in particular completed a pollution prevention setup and highly energy-efficient production systems, and this contributed to the enhancement of their international competitiveness.

Thus, unwittingly, Japan pioneered endeavors for preventing global warming, with industry taking the lead.

In the second half of the 1980s, environmental pollution escalated into a global issue.

Against the backdrop of the expansion

of socioeconomic activities throughout the world, new types of pollution caused global warming, urban problems and the deterioration of the living environment. Therefore, it became clear that the then-current framework of anti-pollution measures, which was centered on combating industrial emissions, proved incapable of coping with the new situation.

In such a context, mankind has been awakened to the various threats to the environment, such as global warming, ozone layer destruction and acid rain, as is evidenced by the Earth Summit held in Brazil in 1992, and subsequent international meetings on these subjects. Details will be discussed in a separate article. International joint endeavors, in line with the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change and the utilization of technologies and know-how developed in Japan based on its experience in fighting pollution, are moving into high gear.

The consumer has a major role to play in dealing with the problem of waste, but since it is difficult to directly control consumer behavior, a new system has to be devised.

Thus, today's environmental problems have far greater dimensions in time and space and a greater impact than conventional problems, in that all people are polluters and pollution victims at the same time. Therefore, all parties concerned should take preventive measures as quickly as possible.

Launching of the Environment Agency and MITI's role

Here I want to say some words about the governmental bodies responsible for environmental administration.

The Environment Agency established in 1971 is a permanent administrative body charged with undertaking environment-related administration from a comprehensive viewpoint. The Environmental Pollution Control Headquarters, which handled pollution problems in the past, contributed to the completion of an environment-related legal system by functioning as a powerful coordinating body. However, it was an ad-hoc

body set up on the basis of a Cabinet meeting decision. Since a permanent body was needed, this led to the establishment of the Environment Agency.

The Environment Agency's role is to perform overall coordination of environment-related administration, including pollution control. To be specific, the agency has the power to control pollution by taking such measures as setting various environmental criteria and coordination of the government budget related to environmental conservation.

As regards the division of roles between the Environment Agency and other ministries and agencies, including MITI, the Environment Agency performs overall coordination of anti-pollution measures while other ministries and agencies implement measures relating to their respective jurisdictions.

MITI is in charge of formulating and implementing trade policies, industrial policies and energy policies. In particular, MITI formulates and implements policies for the progress and reform of industry.

In view of such a division of roles, MITI is expected to lead the nation's industry in an environmentally acceptable direction smoothly and surely by using its expertise in diverse industrial activities and applying proper policies and measures. The approaches which must be taken toward environmental problems today are complicated and diverse. Therefore, I personally believe that accelerated implementation of effective environmental conservation measures for each sector of industry, by designing systems that meet the realities of each industry, developing down-to-earth technologies, extending guidance and furnishing subsidies.

Environment-related policies and measures taken in Japan

Next, I want to take an overall look at the policies and measures taken in Japan for environment protection.

I do not have enough space to discuss in detail the energy-saving measures taken in Japan, which furnish an important prescription for the prevention of

global warming, so I hope that this matter will be discussed in a separate article.

(1) *The Basic Law on the Environment*

The Basic Law on the Environment, enacted in 1993, clarified the basic concept underlying the policy for environment protection and set the basic framework for pollution control measures.

The Basic Law for Environmental Pollution Control enacted in 1957 was a law intended to prevent pollution. With the emergence of new environmental problems, however, an overall approach that transcended the old framework became necessary, so the Basic Law on the Environment was enacted.

This law classifies pollution into air pollution, water pollution, soil contamination, noise, vibration, ground subsidence, and offensive odor. It sets criteria for pollution control, and defines the responsibilities of the government and business corporations. As enforcement laws for the implementation of pollution control measures, the eight laws mentioned in (2) below were enacted.

The Basic Law on the Environment stipulates that the government must take measures to settle disputes relating to pollution and to extend relief to pollution victims. For this purpose, the Law Concerning Compensation for Pollution-related Health Damage, etc. and the Law Concerning Entrepreneurs' Liabilities for Pollution Prevention were enacted.

(2) *Regulatory measures for environmental protection*

The eight enforcement laws enacted for the prevention of pollution were the Air Pollution Prevention Law, the Water Pollution Prevention Law, the Noise Regulation Law, the Vibration Regulation Law, the Offensive Odor Prevention Law, the Law for the Prevention of Farmland Contamination, the Industrial Water Law and the Law Concerning the Extraction of Groundwater for Building Construction.

Moreover, the Law Concerning the Appointment of a Pollution Controlling Group at Specified Factories was enacted to make business operators complete pollution control systems at their companies. This law requires specific factories to appoint pollution control managers to

ensure that the factories conform to the laws and pollution control regulations.

Concerning the disposal of waste, the Waste Disposal and Public Cleaning Law defines "waste," and specifies the ways to dispose of it and ways to sort and recycle it.

To cope with the limited capacity of conventional disposal methods, which has become evident in Japan in recent years, the Law Concerning the Acceleration of Sorting, Collection and Reuse of Containers and Packages (the so-called Containers and Packages Recycling Law) was enacted to clarify the division of roles among consumers, local governments and business operators in the recycling of waste. This law came partially into force in April 1997. It is an epoch-making item of legislation in that it is the first law in Japan that requires business operators to recycle the waste they produce. The details of this will be discussed in a separate article. According to the schedule, the scope of application of the law will be expanded by 2000 to cover plastics other than polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles and also paper packages such as paper boxes.

(3) *Economic measures for environmental protection*

Economic measures being taken in Japan for pollution control are broadly classified into two types, financial measures and tax incentives.

As financial measures, low-interest loans are available from government banks for the construction of specific pollution control equipment and facilities and recycling equipment and facilities.

As tax incentives, some tax credits are available from both central and local government for the installation of certain pollution control equipment and recycling facilities.

As already said, similar incentives are also available for the dissemination of energy-saving facilities. Some take the form of legislation. For example, the Law on Temporary Measures to Promote Business Activities for the Rational Use of Energy and the Utilization of Recycled Resources (the so-called Energy-Saving and Recycling

Support Law) has been enacted to encourage business activities that contribute to energy-saving, waste recycling and the non-use of fluorocarbons that destroy the ozone layer. A project recognized as "a specified activity" under this law is eligible for financial and tax privileges.

In addition to the above assistance measures, MITI is taking the lead in the development of pollution control technologies. MITI gives priority to areas where immediate action is required for the smooth application of regulatory systems, such as the development of revolutionary technologies that result in a breakthrough where a near-term incentive for business corporations cannot work well, and the development of attractive recyclable products.

(4) Encouraging voluntary endeavors by companies

Environmental problems now facing the country have their causes in diverse economic activities on the part of people or industry. Therefore they should be tackled by every person and company squarely sharing their roles in the spirit of the Basic Law on the Environment. Socioeconomic activities, however, are so diverse that no single measure or single set of measures can deal with the problems which exist, so voluntary endeavors by each person and each entity to reduce the burden on the environment can be very effective.

Recognizing this, MITI has taken such action as the compilation of an industrial environment vision (in June 1994) and a global environment vision (in April 1997) to stimulate voluntary endeavors for environmental protection by industry, which performs the leading role in economic activities. In these visions, MITI has suggested a viewpoint and approaches to be taken by each industrial sector.

In the private sector, the Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren) announced a "Keidanren action program for environmental protection" in June 1997 and declared that it would launch a voluntary drive to protect the global environment. This action program has the following features:

- It calls for voluntary endeavors by each industrial sector, participation by a very wide range of industries (36 industries with 137 organizations).

- Many industries have projected their respective numerical targets for fighting global warming and reducing industrial waste.

- The results will be reviewed at regular intervals and endeavors for uninterrupted improvement will be made.

The program is based on MITI's vision but is on a private basis, involving no privileges or mandatory regulations. MITI greatly welcomes such voluntary endeavors by industry and places great expectations on its results.

Furthermore, MITI is endeavoring to disseminate an environmental management system for helping business corporations consider the environment in all the aspects of their operations. It is working to complete institutional and technological foundations that stimulate business activities which harmonize with the environment. In this regard, MITI takes an active part in debates at the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and is introducing ISO standards into domestic standards in order to internationally align environment-related standards, such as the life cycle assessment method and the eco-labeling standard.

(5) Package of measures to generate eco-businesses

To cope with today's environmental problems, Japan must transform its socioeconomic structure into one capable of attaining sustainable growth with less burden on the environment. Eco-businesses, such as the recycling industry, are playing a significant role in this transformation. They are expected to attain strong growth because of the urgency of environmental problems.

To carry out structural reform of the Japanese economy, which is one of the major tasks of the government, the Cabinet approved "the action program for a structural reform of the economy and the creation of new industries" in May 1997. This program sets out the government's policy course for the creation of new industries and an interna-

tionally attractive new business environment as well as a package of measures for this end. It contains "a program to foster an environment for the creation of new industries" (15 new or promising industries) that will encourage the growth of industrial sectors which will create employment and expand market potential. One of these is environment-related business.

Thus, environment-related industries teem with growth potential, but the administration must prepare the infrastructure necessary for their development. The "action program" contains diverse plans, including the completion of social systems, the development of new technologies, and the training of a competent workforce. The government intends to carry out measures on a priority basis in line with this program and encourage pioneering entrepreneurs to actively foster the growth of environment-related industries.

Roles of environmental administration in Japan

While environmental issues vitally affect the survival of mankind, they should also be accorded a strategic position as the basic factor for further growth of Japan into an economic society that is in harmony with the environment.

Internationally, Japan should take the initiative in endeavors to overcome environmental problems. Domestically, this country must muster the wisdom of its people to ensure that "environmental protection," "economic growth" and "a stabilized energy supply and demand" harmonize with each other so that the Japanese socioeconomic society of the 21st century will be more affluent and vigorous. I believe that this is the role of Japan's environmental administration, particularly of MITI.

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