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Developments to Watch

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THE MOON IS MADE OF ... AN UNLIMITED ENERGY SOURCE?

The isotope known as helium 3 would be an ideal fuel for nuclear fusion, a potentially unlimited source of clean energy. Unfortunately, the isotope's concentration in naturally occurring helium is just one part per 100 million—too sparse to harvest. So Japan's Ministry of International Trade & Industry is eyeing the moon, which scientists believe contains the rare isotope in abundance. The sizable challenge: to reach the moon, harvest the He3, and bring it home. To help brainstorm a way to do all this, MITI has enlisted Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Nissan, Hitachi, and 17 other big companies. But even with corporate support, Japan will probably need to stand on NASA's shoulders to master the secrets of space travel, lunar bases, transport vehicles, and techniques to separate He3 from lunar sand. Right now, says one official, "this is barely even a feasibility study." MITI won't comment on the cost, although such projects typically run about $250 million. If all goes well, MITI says the first moon landings could occur in 2020.