

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON PLUTONIUM STOCKS

from

SUPPORTERS OF NUCLEAR ENERGY

Supporters of Nuclear Energy is a small self-financing group of individuals who have been campaigning for more than 12 years for the development of nuclear power. Many members have worked in the nuclear industry. Lists of members of the SONE committee and patrons are attached.

In answer to Questions 4 and 6 we believe that the Government has selected the correct preliminary view in proposing to “burn” plutonium stocks in power stations. Indeed, we consider that it would be a profligate waste bordering on the criminal dissipation of a national resource to do anything else.

The safest place for plutonium stocks is in nuclear power station fuel generating electricity. It makes productive use of an element in an environment that minimises any risk of proliferation and puts it beyond the reach of terrorists. It also actively and eminently usefully converts a sword - a former element in weaponry - into a ploughshare.

We acknowledge that the MOX plant at Sellafield, fabricating mixed uranium and plutonium fuel, has so far worked imperfectly, though other plants, notably in France, have been successful. But that is no reason for Britain to abandon MOX technology, given the major benefits that flow from it, but to make sure it operates efficiently.

Britain has abandoned far too much manufacturing and should not contract out of such hi-tech areas as MOX when a global nuclear renaissance, subject to the lessons learned from the Japanese Fukushima-Daichi emergency, is already under way.

Given that we hold these stocks, we should make best use of them. Britain is not so rich a country, certainly not these days, that it can afford to squander assets possibly for no better reason than that some sections of the population erroneously and irrationally describe plutonium as “the most dangerous substance known to man”. Even if it were, there would be no case for effectively postponing a decision what to do with it when it could be more rapidly disposed of by generating low-carbon electricity.

This brings us to the problem that lies behind the very existence of part of the plutonium stock – namely, the reprocessing of “spent” nuclear fuel as distinct from the recovery of former defence material.

In dealing with it, we believe we answer your Questions 1, 2, 3, 5 and 7.

Not every country reprocesses “spent fuel” for a variety of reasons. Up to now the main economic argument against reprocessing is that the world is awash with uranium: it is consequently cheaper to adopt a “once through” policy and store the “spent” fuel, pending eventual disposal. To us this is short-termism of the worst kind – a readiness to waste assets regardless of future need, not to mention the faster rundown than necessary of a global resource with environmental consequences.

It sits oddly with the Government’s attempts to promote recycling of other much less valuable materials, often regardless of the economics of their recycling. It often seems to us that environmentalists believe that everything should be recycled except uranium and plutonium.

It should also be noted that a former chairman of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission has recently said that America’s “once through” nuclear fuel cycle is “an enormous waste of potential energy”, not to mention lost technological and competitive capability. In short, the economics of recycling – or abandoning it - cannot be measured simply by the saving in generation costs now.

In a world where demand for energy is going to increase dramatically, we simply cannot afford now to throw away up to 96 per cent of the energy value still left in “spent” fuel. In terms of the prudent use of resources, that is a monstrous and irresponsible proposition.

It follows, in answer to Q1, that we agree with the Government’s view that it is not realistic to wait until fast breeder reactor technology is available before taking a decision on how to manage plutonium stocks now. That at best is procrastination (with a price tag attached); at worst it assumes that in the interim there will be no reprocessing and that, like the USA, we opt for “an enormous waste of potential energy” and contract out of a branch of high technology we shall eventually need with, at this stage, incalculable costs

Britain has retreated for long enough in nuclear power matters. As we seek to bring about a nuclear renaissance, we are beginning to see some of the problems and costs that have resulted. This is no time to compound the mistakes of the past and opt for more short-termism.

If we are serious about getting back into nuclear power – and for the sake of medium, term energy security we had better be – we ought to enter the business wholeheartedly and in a way that enables us to compete domestically through electricity prices and internationally by mastering all aspects of its technology.

In short, SONE takes the view we should not just exploit our stocks of plutonium now; we should also ensure in the future that we can, in the national interest, recover the 96% of useful energy remaining in “spent” nuclear fuel. Anything less could not be graced with the term “policy”, it could only be classed as timid temporising.

We are encouraged to note that Professor Sir David King, former Government Chief Scientist, has just issued a report through the Smith School of Enterprise and Environment in Oxford, generally supporting the objective of this memorandum.

Signed – Secretary, Supporters of Nuclear Energy