

DECC response to briefing on current radwaste disposal and storage policy issues with special reference to the GDF proposals paper

1. Introduction

This is a brief response to the paper produced by Ruth Balogh for the DECC / NGO Forum meeting on the 17 October 2012.

2. Response

Geology

Not enough is yet known about the geology in Cumbria to determine suitability for a geological disposal facility. It is important to note that Nirex only looked in detail at one location in west Cumbria and more extensive geological studies will be required. Stage 4 and 5 of the Managing Radioactive Waste Safely (MRWS) process will involve extensive investigation of the geology in the volunteered area, if a decision to participate is taken. The Government is committed to working in partnership with volunteer communities.

Inventory

It is technologically feasible to design a geological disposal facility to contain both intermediate and high level waste. The Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM) considers geological disposal to be the best available approach for the long-term management of all the material categorised as waste in the CoRWM inventory when compared with the risks associated with other methods of management. Included in the inventory that CoRWM considered were (non-Drigg) LLW, ILW, HLW, Uranium, Plutonium *and* Spent Nuclear Fuel.

In responding to the West Cumbria (WC) MRWS Partnership's Partnership principles, Government accepted that host communities needed to understand the potential inventory of waste to be disposed of in a geological disposal facility by the end of surface based investigations (end of Stage 5).

Only one volunteer

To date there have been three expressions of interest in participating in the MRWS process, from Copeland and Allerdale Borough Councils, and Cumbria County Council. The opportunity for other communities to express an interest remains open. Government is encouraging other potential volunteer communities to come forward. Expressing an interest does not mean a firm commitment to hosting a disposal facility. The principle of a Right of Withdrawal is set out in the 2008 MRWS White Paper.

The MRWS White Paper

The MRWS White Paper was developed following extensive consultation. The formation of a partnership at this stage was not envisaged in the MRWS White Paper and therefore the formation of the WC MRWS Partnership could be seen as

exceeding expectations. It has conducted extensive stakeholder engagement in Cumbria over the last three years, as detailed in their final report. The decision making bodies (DMBs) are level of local Government judged in the White Paper to be the appropriate level to take decisions on behalf of their communities.

Interim storage

The WC MRWS Partnership was formed to discuss whether or not to participate in the MRWS programme. Interim storage is not a solution for the long-term management of waste. Long-term research and development on the management of waste is ongoing.

Timescales

Whilst Government considers it is important to maintain momentum in taking forward the MRWS Programme, it is also important that the process only moves forward at a pace that local communities are comfortable with.

The NDA work on acceleration looked at the efficiency of technological solutions, rather than as an acceleration of the MRWS process. Any decision on whether acceleration of key dates in the current indicative timeline is possible will be based on a thorough appraisal of credible options.

The West Cumbria MRWS process

The Partnership conducted an extensive consultation to obtain views of local people, and gathered information to address concerns where they could. The Partnership's final report is the culmination of over three years of work and sets out the Partnership's opinions on the issues that would be involved in taking part in a search to find a suitable site for a GDF for higher activity radioactive wastes in west Cumbria. Not all Partnership members agreed on every issue discussed, and this is reflected in the report.

Membership of the Partnership included local Government wider than that of the DMBs. Environmental NGOs were invited to be members of the Partnership, however the invitation was never taken up. The NDA was not a lead body, and was only an observing member in common with the nuclear regulators and DECC.

The poll commissioned by the Partnership from Ipsos MORI required net support from all the communities, which was achieved. The survey also found that support for taking part in the search was linked to knowledge about the search: those who were more aware of the search were also more likely to support taking part in the search for a suitable site.

Government and the NDA continue to provide information to the DMBs to resolve the issues of concern in order to assist the decision making process.