ANC WASTE DUMPING NEWSLETTER

no 8 FEB 1982

DATE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THE NEXT NEWSLETTER
1ST APRIL 1982

NEWSLETTER ADDRESS: 22 CRIFFEL AVENUE, LONDON SW2. 01-671-6169

This newsletter is late- I'm sorry, it's the first one I've done, and has co-incided with me moving and starting a new job. I'll try to do better next time.

It would help though, if I had a slightly clearer idea of where the ANC Waste Dumping Group, and thus the newsletter, are to go next. On the following page I suggest that intermediate level waste disposal (and sea dumping in particular) should be our priority, together with an attempt to cause government to produce a sensible waste policy. Perhaps, though, the groups and individuals involved in what has proved to be a successful campaign will wish to move onto other issues or take a well earned breather. I hope not, because the problem won't go away, and without critical pressure being applied, the government will feel free to act behind closed doors. The geological brceholes programme was the product of just such decision making: I fear than an increase in the amount dumped at sea will be next on the cards. Are we to sit back and watch....? Please contribute your thoughts for the next newsletter.

Geoff Young

Many thanks to Louise Flower for all of the previous newsletters. Best of luck in future ventures.

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We've won. As I'm sure everybody knows, on 16th December, Tom King made a statement on behalf of the government, in which they formally abandoned the deep bore programme for high-level waste disposal in favour of above-ground storage for 50 years or so. Just what we've been arguing for. BUT THIS IS NOT THE END, by any means.

Three points in his statement bear close examination, because of their implications of government thinking.

Priority is being given to the early disposal of intermediate and low-level wastes. Dumping at sea, burial at Drigg and storage are currently the options for the more active end of this spectrum, Local Authority tips are used for the rest. Test bores have been drilled at Harwell to investigate the suitability of the local clay for the burial of intermediate level waste, but the scale of the problem facing the industry is such that this is not likely to be the only site considered. At the moment a number of Magnox station are closed because of cracks in cooling circuits. Berkeley, in particular, may never re-open. Considerable quantities of contaminated concrete and steel will arise with each reactor decommissioned, whatever process is used. Similarly, the nuclear submarine fleet is on its last legs (HMS Dreadnought, the first, is in Chatham docks awaiting a decision about when to scrap it), and when they are dismantled yet more radioactive steel will become 'waste'. The additional build up of research and production facilities for nuclear weapons (eg Chevaline @ £1,000m) will generate more waste; Dungeness B and Hartlepool AGRs coming on stream (well, maybe!) will generate yet more, and so on. The disposal of intermediate level waste was identified in an authorative report from the DoE in 1979 as "the main problem remaining to be solved" because "there is currently no suitable way of disposing of them".

Although less radioactive, and not heat generating, the vast bulk (say, 40,000 cu.m. at the moment) and diverse nature of this waste indicates that any option will be both costly and environmentally doubtful. It seems likely that any attempt to force a land-based burial site on a local community would be strongly resisted, which leaves sea disposal as the obvious option. This, however, has aroused international opposition. High-level waste disposal was a key point of attack from the anti-nuclear movement, but the industry has bought itself time by deferring the disposal decision to our grandchildren. It cannot, however, defer the decision about intermediate level waste, the volumetric build-up is too great. Government/industry have to act, and have to act soon, but they don't know what to do. National financial constraints suggest that corners will be cut, particularly if the pressure is taken off by the anti-nuclear and environmental movements.

* Research is to coninue into the disposal of high-level waste at sea. This is banned by international treaty at the moment, but clearly the 'out of sight-out of mind' notions implicit in using the sea as a dustbin have attractions to public opinion concious politians and industry. A research ship is investigating sites and conditions off West Africa at the moment, although no serious research has been done at the site used for indermediate level waste in the Atlantic.

** Thus the key word in the prevailing ideology remains 'disposal', with all that it implies in terms of retrievability, monitoring and long-term dangers. "A White Paper will be published in due course to set out in more detail the current priorities as we see them". The time to influence the thinking behind the white paper is before, rather than after, its publication. Both the Rdaioactive Waste Directorate of the DoE and those at the AEA concerned with waste are vulnerable at present, after seeing years of work and public relations effort abandoned, and now seems the most important time to pressure their thinking away from disposing of waste whilst continuing to creat more, towards admitting and accepting that the problem is insoluble, that future waste arisings must be minimised by abandoning nuclear power, and that existing wastes require storage in engineered facilities.

Mr Tom King's Statement. from PANDORA, with thanks

"The Government has been reviewping the research programme and this review has highlighted the fact that, the longer such waste is stored, the more safely it could be eventually buried, because there would then be less heat to dissipate. For this reason the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee recommended in their Second Report published earlier this year, that serious consideration should be given to the desirability of storing high-level waste at the surface in solid form for a period of 50 years and possibly much longer. At the end of that period a decision would be needed whether to continue to store it, or bury it deep underground, or to use one of the other methods (emplacement on or under the ocean bed) currently under investigation.

"The Government have now reviewed the geological element in the research programme for high-level waste in the light of that advice (and) the conclusions already reached about general feasibility.

"The Government has been keeping under review the options for high-level waste, and in particular has been reviewing the progress in other countries as well. The considerable level of research work already completed relates in particular to the factors involved in the emplacement of high-level waste deep underground. The Government's objective has been to establish in principle the feasibility of that potential method of disposal and now believes that in the light of its review of progress of work overseas that this is now established in principle, and nothing has emerged to indicate that it would be unacceptable.

"They have decided that this part of the programme should now be reoriented to confirming the applicability to the UK of the findings from research in other countries. For the time being this will be done by means of desk studies, laboratory work and the use of data already available. Exploratory drilling will not be needed for this purpose. The Government will look to the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee for advice on the interpretation and implications of work carried out in other countries, as well as on other aspects.

"Appropriate provision will be made for the surface storage of vitrified waste. In view of the lengthened time-scale and the plans to construct disposal facilities in other countries, it is not now intended to construct a demonstration facility for underground disposal in the UK. Instead the UK will follow closely studies involving underground facilities in Sweden, Canada and the USA for granite, in Belgium for clay, and in the USA and Germany for salt.

"The reorientation of the research programme does not mean that further geological fieldwork would not be useful, and indeed possibly necessary for decisions that may have to be taken at some future date or if any unexpected difficulty became apparent over storage, but it does not have any present priority. The immediate effect of this decision is that the appeals for planning permission for drilling in the Cheviots will be dismissed and the other pending appeals and planning applications will be withdrawn.

"It will now be possible to concentrate the full priority on the continuing research and implementation in ensuring the safe and acceptable storage of wastes. At the same time priority will be given to making progress towards the early disposal of those wastes with a lower level of radioactivity for which there is no technical advantage in delaying disposal. Research will also continue into the feasibility of the ocean disposal options for high-level waste, which have not yet been established. A White Paper will be published in due course to set out in more detail the current priorities as we see them."

(This is the full text of the Department of the Environment's Press Notice No 489, obtainable from DoE, 2 Marsham Street, SW1P 3EB. The conjunction in parenthesis in Para.2 was omitted, but clearly belongs. There is no specific mention of Mullwharchar in the statement; but that application too has been withdrawn by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Mr Younger.)

Underground waste storage tests cancelled

FINANCIAL TIMES REPORTER

FT 17/12/81

BRITAIN WILL not carry out tests on storing radioactive waste underground, the Government announced yesterday. Feasibility is established in principle, said Mr Tom King, Environment Minister, in a Commons written reply.

The decision is based partly on a Government committee report which recommended storing waste on the surface for 50 years or more, and partly on the fact that five other countries are already carrying out tests of underground storage. Ministers will monitor these tests.

Meanwhile, planning appeals and applications for geological studies involving test drilling will be withdrawn or dismissed.

Mr King said, "The Government has been reviewing the research programme and this review has highlighted the fact that the longer waste is stored, the more safely it could be eventually buried, because there would be less heat to dissipate."

The Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee advised earlier this year that the desirability of storing high-level waste in solid form for 50 years or more should be given careful thought. A decision could then be made on alternative methods of disposal.

Most research work had concentrated on underground disposal. Mr King said the Government "now believes that in the light of its review of progress of work overseas this is now established in principle and nothing has emerged to indicate that it would be unacceptable."

Research would now switch to confirming that findings in Sweden, Canada, the U.S., Belgium and Germany would apply to the UK.

"In view of the lengthened time-scale and the plans to construct disposal facilities in other countries, it is not now intended to construct a demonstration facility for underground disposal in the UK," Mr King said.

One immediate effect would be that appeals for planning permission for drilling in the Cheviots would be dismissed and other applications withdrawn.

Research would continue into the disposal of wastes with lower-level radioactivity, and sea-bed disposal. A White Paper would be published setting out priorities.

Government halts nuclear waste t

G. 17/12/81

By Peter Hetherington.

Anti-nuclear groups last night claimed a victory over the Government following an unexpected decision to shelve plans for geological tests in about 20 areas.

Attempts to pursue test drilling to find underground stores for radioactive waste in areas from Northumberland to Worcestershire have been dropped by Mr Tom King, Local Government Minister.

He announced yesterday that planning appeals brought by the Atomic Energy Authority against councils in Ayrshire and Northumberland would be dismissed and applications for geological tests withdrawn. Drilling proposals also ran into objections in Galloway, Wales, Gloucestershire and Hereford-Worcestershire.

Mr King maintained that the principal of storing waste deep underground had been established but that the Government wanted to consider more research from other EEC countries.

The Government decision is based on advice from the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee, which recommended storing waste on the surface for 50 years or more.

Mr King said this advice highlighted the fact that the longer waste is stored on the surface the more safely it can be eventually buried. This is because there would be less heat to dissipate.

Friends of the Earth activists in Scotland, where protesters succeeded in uniting all political parties against a test drilling application in Ayrshire, described the decision as their "greatest ever victory."

They added in a statement: "The principle has been established that nuclear waste is detrimental to the countryside and the Government has admitted that it doesn't know what it is doing."

The Scottish Campaign to Resist the Atomic Menace said the news provided a rare example of Government sensitivity to the opinions of local people.

MPs from all parties welcomed the decision and two South-west Scotland Tory members—Sir Hector Munro and Mr Ian Lang— said the drilling application had been premature and quite unnecessary. A five-week public inquiry was held into the proposal for 32 test bore holes on Mullwharcher Hill, in the Ayrshire constituency of Mr George Younger, the Scottish Secretary. He strongly opposed the project when an opposition MP.

Welsh anti-nuclear campaigners have been fighting for two years to prevent tests in the Dyfi Forest on the Gwynedd-Powys border. The site had been earmarked by the Government-sponsored Institute of Geological Sciences as a likely dumping ground.

Protest groups — Pandora (People Against Nuclear Dumping On Rural Areas) and Madryn (a Welsh name for a cunning fox) — opposed exploration.

Farmers refused to allow scientists on to their land. Demonstrators led by the Arch Druid of Wales picketed offices at Aberystwyth and geologists' cars were boxed in by farm vehicles.

On St David's Day this year, 2,000 people invaded a Forestry Commission plantation near Corris to protest against proposals to drill test bore holes.

COMMENT

NEW SCIENTIST 24/31 DECEMBER 1981

Buried in confusion

MANAGEMENT suspiciously close to the Christmas day, the government revealed last week, in a written answer to a parliamentary question, that it will abandon the drilling needed to prove that nuclear waste can be buried in geological graveyards. The technical reasons for the decision seem straightforward enough, but it was handled in a somewhat puzzling manner. Apart from the proximity to the holiday season, when minds turn to less serious matters and few people are around to report them, it is the way in which those affected by the decision learned of it.

The nuclear industry has never said that highly active waste—produced when nuclear fuel from a reactor is reprocessed to separate the useless fission products from valuable fuel—should be buried underground. The industry has always maintained that if it can turn the liquids into solid blocks, the waste could be stored in "engineered facilities". These might be no more than large buildings or water-cooled cooling ponds—the only requirement is to remove from the blocks the heat that radioactive decay of the fission products inevitably generates. British Nuclear Fuels Limited is now building a waste solidification plant, based on a French process, as a part of its massive £2500 million investment at the Windscale reprocessing facility.

The pressure for geological disposal came partly from the environmentalists. They influenced such groups as the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP). In its sixth report, published in 1976, the RCEP said that Britain should not commit itself to a large nuclear power programme "until it has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that a method exists to ensure the safe containment of long-lived highly radioactive waste for the indefinite future". The RCEP's report led the government to transfer responsibility for nuclear waste over to the Department of the Environment, and one of the department's first moves was to establish a geological research programme. As part of this work the Institute of Geological Sciences (IGS) was commissioned, through the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), to conduct drilling. As a result of last week's decision, the government dismissed NERC's plea for granting permission to drill.

The RCEP's report also led to the formation of the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee (RWMAC). Last year RWMAC expressed concern about the delays in drilling because of the difficulty in obtaining planning permission for the IGS's work. Last week's announcement ignores this concern but justifies abandoning the drilling with a reference to RWMAC's suggestion, in its second annual report, that "serious consideration should be given to the possibility that containment in an engineered storage system, either above ground or subsurface, for which technology already exists, might be the best way to deal with solidified high-level wastes for at least 50 years and possibly much longer". In the written answer, the government says that it has been reviewing the disposal of highly active nuclear waste "and this review has highlighted the fact that the longer such waste is stored the more safely it could eventually be buried because there would be less heat to dissipate". Of undermined interest, the statement says that in the light of work overseas "drilling has emerged to indicate that it would be unacceptable". Thus we have moved in just a few months from a position in which the government's advisory committee on radioactive-waste disposal was urging completion of the research programme to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, to a position where, without doing anything, there suddenly aren't any gaps.

The irony is that despite these odd goings-on the scientific case is pretty clear: geological disposal was never really necessary, and nothing will be lost by halting the drilling programme. In fact, by taking away one focus for the anti-nuclear movement, the government may have done something to damp down the controversy surrounding nuclear power. However, the way in which the latest announcement was made can only confuse the issue. In the nuclear industry the fear is that the anti-nuclear movement will now attack nuclear power because waste disposal is not proved "beyond reasonable doubt".

As if this confusion were not enough, it seems that the Department of the Environment told neither NERC nor the UK Atomic Energy Authority that it planned to abandon the drilling programme. In that case, who advised the government? Last week's announcement promises that there will be a White Paper on radioactive-waste disposal "in due course". If it wanted to avoid confusion the government might have done better to have delayed the decision on the drilling programme—a definite change of direction, if not a U-turn—until it could publish all of the evidence. As it is we now have Friends of the Earth claiming its "greatest victory ever". Quite how it can be a victory to have forced the government to abandon an inessential but useful research programme that could have helped to produce an environmentally superior waste disposal system isn't clear. The public can be forgiven for being confused by these strange goings on. □

Observer 29 Nov 81

Nuclear riddle

THE Soviet Union may be dumping radioactive waste in the Arctic. Professor Ellis Holm, a member of a Swedish scientific Arctic expedition last year, says he found plutonium, caesium, cobalt and americum round the island of Spitzbergen.

According to the professor, there were up to four times more of these radioactive substances than would be expected from known nuclear tests.

Professor Holm said yesterday that the presence of cobalt indicated that the substances found were neither from the known 1960s tests in the Barents Sea nor from a reactor on the Kola Peninsula producing plutonium 239 for military warheads. One possibility was that they came from an explosion aboard a Soviet nuclear submarine.

Chris Mosey

Remit of borehole inquiry is called into question

By MICHAEL RITCHIE

Complaints that opponents of the exploratory test bore drilling programme in the Mullwharchar area of South Ayrshire were misled" by the remit and terms of the public inquiry into the controversial proposals have been submitted to the Commissioner for Local Administration in Scotland.

This action is being pursued in spite of the decision by the Secretary of State for Scotland in November to veto the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority's plans to sink boreholes near Loch Doon to assess the suitability of the granite rock for the dumping of nuclear waste.

The instigator of the maladministration charge against the Scottish Development Department is Mrs Margaret Ralley of Ayr, who gave evidence as an individual at the inquiry at Ayr.

She is claiming that the Government are using the public inquiry system "incorrectly" and that the Scottish Secretary, Mr George Younger, her Member of Parliament, had refused the drilling application mainly because the Government had rementated their geological research programme for nuclear waste storage.

Mr Younger's judgment, she said last night, gave reasons which were not admissible at the inquiry. "The remit and terms given to witnesses at the inquiry were that the boreholes application could only be discussed with a view to their environmental and social effect on the local community.

"Research programme aspects were not included in the inquiry so it seems clear that witnesses opposing the issue were misled."

Mrs Ralley — who discussed her grievances with Mr Younger before submitting her complaint against the SDD and the Reporter at the inquiry — said it was wrong that public inquiries should be used by the Government to reflect national issues. "They should reflect issues of local importance with public inquiry commissions being used to reflect national matters."

Support for Mrs Ralley's move has come from one of the main opponents of the UKAEA scheme, the Scottish Conservation Society. Their spokeswoman, Mrs Kathleen Miller, said Mr Younger's decision rejecting the Reporters' findings meant they would withdraw none of their criticisms of the inquiry system and the Scottish Office administrators.

The society believed this action might have implications for other public inquiries and Mrs Miller went on to describe the Ayr inquiry as "a patent farce" which should never be repeated.

She added: "The Reporter's role was particularly sordid as he accepted a thoroughly muddled remit. He refused to insist on taking truly objective technical assessors to advise him on the environmental questions which he says were key factors in this case."

The Reporter had, instead, accepted environmental advice from the National Conservancy Council, whom Mrs Miller described as "a body in which the bureaucrats overruled the scientists who truly care for nature conservation."

The NCC's refusal to oppose the test bores was an act of "extreme cowardice."

The society would continue to challenge NCC's objectivity as they shared the same "paymaster" as the UKAEA. It was a "conspiracy" by Government-paid officials which resulted in the local people's conservation case being rejected by the Reporter.

In his decision to refuse permission for drilling, Mr Younger upheld a decision by the local planning authority, Kyle and Carrick District Council, and he based it on the Government intention to review their nuclear research programme concentrating on methods for the safe storage of waste with a lower level of radioactivity.

Scotsman 5-1-82

Unless you're actively searching for it, you wouldn't guess that the AEA has just lost a large chunk of its waste research programme. February's Atom reprints the statement Tom King made as part of the regular 'In Parliament' section, but apart from that, nary a word. How odd!

SIZEWELL

The Sizewell inquiry will take place next January at The Maltings, Snape in Suffolk. Pre-inquiry meetings to inform the Inspector of views on very important aspects of the Inquiry will take place on March 22 and 23 at the Maltings. The meetings will specifically look at 'the general procedure to be adopted for the main hearings, the scope of the evidence likely to be required or offered and the availability of essential documents and other information'. The Inspector wishes to have notice of any other matters to be raised (eg equal funding). It's important to remember that the Inquiry will consider, amongst other things, "the arrangements for waste management, in the light of the views of the authorising departments". Although the concern about the "views of the authorising departments" will doubtless be raised as part of the evidence presented by many groups, it seems important that the strength of local feeling about nuclear waste disposal- and its implications for any future nuclear stations in the light of Flowern- should be made very clear. Which is to say, that each group or individual should register as objectors now, and start clamouring for access to information and funds. Those considering boycotting the Inquiry will also need to register if their boycott is to be noticed. The Inquiry Secretary is D P Hauser, Room 1641, Thames House South, Millbank, London SW1.

text of a PRESS STATEMENT issued by the SCOTTISH CONSERVATION SOCIETY

28. 12. 81.

On Christmas Eve the SCS recieved the final two official papers of the Mullwarchar Nuclear Waste Inquiry.

The SDD Reporter, Mr William Campbell, sent his final report, and in it he advised the Secretary of State to GIVE planning permission to the UKAEA for test boring.

The Scottish Office sent a letter announcing the S-of-S's decision, which was to reject Mr Campbells advice, and giving his reasons. He agreed that the environmental damage caused by drilling in this area would be 'undoubted loss of amenity and solitude', and that there are no apparent sanctions which could give the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC) power to make sure the environment was protected. But he said that because the High Level Nuclear Waste Programme had now been changed, it was not now justifiable to allow damage to the wilderness.

Against massive odds therefore the Society and other groups made their conservation case stick, and we regard the high price paid as necessary. But we withdraw none of our critisism of the Inquiry system and the administrators.

An Ayr housewife who took part in the Inquiry has taken to the Ombudsman a charge of 'Maladministration' against the SDD for its handling of the Inquiry. We endorse and support this move, which may well have implications for other PI's.

This kind of inquiry must never be repeated. It was a patent farce. Three different government policies on test-bores have appeared since the research was first announced.

The Reporters role was particularly sordid. He accepted a thoroughly muddled remit, and he refused to insist on taking truly objective technical assessors to advise him on the environmental questions which he says were the key factors in this case. Instead he accepted advice on the environment from the NCC- a body in which the bureaucrats overruled the scientists who truly care for nature conservation. The NCC's refusal to oppose the test bores was an act of extreme cowardice. The Society challenged their objectivity from the very beginning because they share the same paymaster as the UKAEA and the Forestry Commission, who actually sent a witness to speak FOR the UKAEA. It was only by this conspiracy of government-paid officials that the local people's conservation case came to be rejected by the Reporter.

But what has happened to the urgent, over-riding 'National Interest' in test bores which Mr Campbell, the Reporter, thought more important than protection of the wilderness? In a few months it has evaporated, taking with it the monstrous plan of Sir Denys Wilkinson and Michael Heseltine that a 'Pilot Repository' would be built by 1995. The whole five-year-long construction of government, UKAEA, IGS, and EEC has collapsed, taking with it a very foolish-looking Reporter and his misconceived Inquiry.

Essentially we believe that the 'reorientation' of the High Level Nuclear Waste policy was made now because of public pressure. The people of southwest Scotland were well informed and made their views clear. In the end the S-of-S counted the votes and made a political decision. He has not ruled out burial of waste in granite- he has simply delayed research for political convinience. The waste now is to be stored for a longer period above ground. It now appears that the recommendation of Sir Patrick McCall, the Chairman of our Peoples Planning Inquiry Commission, has been adopted as official government policy! Mr Younger has been clever. He has defended the position of himself and his colleagues on this issue for the next election. BUT he has kept the options open for nuclear scientists and politicians in the future.

ONE THING IS NEW. For us, there is no return to the days of innocence and ignorance. We know how about Nuclear Waste, about the UKAEA's ambition and carelessness, and about politicians' irresponsibility- letting the problem grow daily while keeping the people in the dark about the true price to be paid now and in the future for nuclear power and nuclear weapons.

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In the last newsletter, a petition about French nuclear tests and Japanese plans to dump waste in the Pacific was reprinted. The Pacific Concerns Resources Centre report that petitions have been sent in from 35 different countries. Keep sending them in.....

A-waste may be stored on surface

By Anthony Tucker,
Science Correspondent

Britain may store its hottest nuclear waste materials on the surface at Windscale until a better solution turns up, according to Mr Tom King, the Environment Minister responsible for nuclear waste management.

Mr King said yesterday that he has always held the view that since high level nuclear waste — that is the intensely radioactive concentrates from nuclear fuel reprocessing — has to be stored for several years before disposal can even be contemplated it might be best to keep it indefinitely in engineered stores on the surface.

This option, recently given emphasis by the Nuclear Waste Management Committee, chaired by Sir Denys Wilkinson, apparently lay behind the DoE decision to suspend the drilling programme aimed at finding secure underground disposal sites.

The problem of nuclear waste disposal, highlighted in the Flowers report by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, presents problems which may be insoluble at the present time.

Although, as shown in the latest DoE report, research has been stepped up substantially during the past four years, the essential difficulties of long-term disposal — that is making sure that over periods of thousands of years the radioactive materials cannot get into water or into food chains — have not been solved.

Mr King said yesterday that many scientists had considered for some time that surface storage was the best solution at the present state of technology. The proposal would be storage as cooled liquid for several years — perhaps a decade or more — and then vitrification or some other solidification process which would lock up the radioactive materials in a way which made surface storage convenient.

Cold storage plan for atomic waste

by GEOFFREY LEAN

BRITAIN'S highly toxic radioactive waste may be kept above ground indefinitely, says Mr Tom King, a senior environment Minister.

If the suggestion is implemented it will mark the completion of an astonishing reversal of policy.

Until last month, the Government's main proposal for disposing of the waste, which must be kept isolated from people for hundreds of thousands of years, was to bury it underground in special depositories in stable geological formations.

Then Mr King, Mr Michael Heseltine's deputy in charge of environmental protection, announced that the Government was abandoning its programme of making test drills to try to find suitable disposal areas. The programme had been vigorously opposed by environmentalists and residents of the area where the tests were proposed.

Instead, he suggested, the waste should be kept in cold storage above ground for 50 to 100 years. The announcement delighted environmentalists but infuriated the nuclear industry.

Mr King's latest bombshell is delivered in an interview with the BBC Radio 'World This Weekend' programme to be broadcast at lunchtime.

He is asked whether, in view of scientific uncertainty about the safety of disposing of waste underground, it might not have to be left on the surface indefinitely.

He replies: 'I have personally felt that was always a possibility,' and adds that it might be 'the most sensible thing to do' even if there are no problems with underground disposal.

One advantage would be that it would be possible to monitor the waste and yet keep it away from contact with the public, he said.

Another would be that future generations might want to recover valuable raw materials from the waste.

The decision to stop drilling was only the latest in a series of bold environmental decisions by Mr King, who has built up a reputation among both environmentalists and their opponents as a particularly resolute Minister. He announced last year's reduction in the lead content of petrol and campaigned successfully for an EEC ban on the import of whale products.

He decided to stop drilling partly for political and economic reasons. The programme was attracting enormous opposition and it would have cost the Government some £10 million a year.

He had always thought that it would be better to store the waste above ground, at least for a while, as it loses much of its heat and radioactivity during the first 100 years and would need to be monitored during that time. When he found 'some senior figures in the nuclear industry making a similar point, he decided to stop the drilling.

But his decision has angered some of his own advisers on the official Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee. The committee is meeting this week and members are expected to criticise the decision.

The detritus of death

GUARDIAN LEADER 26/1/82

Flowers, the most influential independent report on the future of nuclear power, advised against any substantial increase in the programme until the problem of storing nuclear waste had been solved. Taken literally, that advice would mean no substantial expansion of the programme at all, short of some fanciful method of disposal like shooting the material into the sun. For as far as earthbound systems are concerned it cannot be shown in the lifetime of anyone now present that any system is safe. The problem was one which the early developers of nuclear power — first for weapons, then for electricity — either did not consider or, if they considered it, shelved. The Department of the Environment now has the job of finding suitable repositories for the waste. It has concluded that for the time being there is no practicable alternative but to put it in tanks above ground and monitor its cooling and loss of radioactivity as the years, or the centuries, roll by. Up to now we have accumulated 1,000 cubic metres of highly toxic waste, some of which will remain toxic for thousands of years. More comes into being every year. What our descendants will do with it may boggle, as Mr Haig would say, their minds.

Of the two possible systems, surface storage is doubtless preferable, if only because the material can be got at in an emergency. The Atomic Energy Authority has hitherto believed that a solution lay in turning the waste products into glass, which could then be buried, and research into that method will go on. But French studies have shown that radioactive material can be leached through the glass into the environment during the almost geologically long periods in prospect: and once the material is free, no one can safely predict the course it might take back to the earth's surface.

It makes political as well as scientific sense, therefore, to stop drilling test holes for burial and forestall the protests of Mr David Penhaligan and other outlying residents of the more stable parts of these islands. But there seems more to the Department's decision than that. The whole question of nuclear power has now been given low priority. No more is heard of the plans for a new plant every year for a decade. The inquiry into a pressurized water reactor at Sizewell has been put off for another year which effectively means, having regard to election dates and reassessment periods, that nothing can happen before 1985. Does this matter? Not if current energy forecasting is even roughly right. Every year sees a few per cent shaved off the previously predicted requirements. When the recession ends, do we simply return to heavy engineering and aluminium smelting? Or are we so far into electronics that we are no longer bound by the upward curves on the energy graphs which were being circulated as recently as the Windscale inquiry? Energy predictions have been the most notoriously fallible of statistics and there is just a chance that they will be so again. Effectively the decision to downgrade nuclear power postpones the entire debate for another generation of politicians to settle. They may not thank the present generation any more than we thank the manufacturers of strontium 90 who have left their nuclear garbage behind.

Clearing out atom waste

G 2/2/82

Sir,—Your leading article "The detritus of death" (January 26)—a most unfortunate headline—misrepresented the current position concerning the management and disposal of highly radioactive waste.

Your assertion that "the Department of the Environment has concluded that for the time being there is no practicable alternative but to put it in tanks above ground" is incorrect. Plans are well advanced for building a plant at Sellafield in order to convert the highly active waste, which is at present stored in tanks in liquid form, into solid blocks of glass.

These plans are supported by the DoE and by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate. The advantages will be considerable. Storing and handling a solid is easier, the volume is reduced, less maintenance is required and the waste is in a form suitable for permanent disposal.

We have long argued that this vitrified waste should be stored on the surface for many decades to allow the heat associated with radioactive decay to decline.

In fact, recent work at Harwell reinforces our confidence in the suitability of glasses as a form in which highly active waste can be contained. The French experiments to which you refer were carried out under conditions far different from those to which the glasses will be subjected in practice. Our own published studies, made under far more realistic experimental conditions and on glass compositions that will be used in vitrifying waste, have confirmed extremely low leaching rates.

It is also difficult to follow your reasoning that the whole question of nuclear power is now being given low priority when three new stations are due to be commissioned this year, which will raise the proportion of our electricity produced by nuclear reactors from 12 to 20 per cent.

(Dr) L. E. J. Roberts.
Member of the UK Atomic Energy Authority and
Director of Harwell.

1984 - speak for Windscale.

"European anti-dumping groups have continued the summers activities, with September demos in Belgium and Portugal. On Sept. 10th Dutch ships left Zeebrugge, Belgium, carrying Dutch, Belgian and Swiss waste to the Atlantic dumping grounds 700km N-E of Spain. Greenpeace's Sirius had planned a protest presence, but couldn't make it, The Spanish fishing boat Ujelo took its place." Scram Energy Bulletin, Dec/Jan.

"Due to opposition from the Northern Marianas islanders Japan's application for permission for 'experimental' waste dumping in the Pacific (900km south-east of Tokyo) has been deferred." Scram Energy Bulletin, Oct/Nov.

"On the dangers to the marine environment from the dumping of radioactive waste at sea PCAP has received the support of a number of union leaders, including Joe Gormley, who is going through the complicated procedure of raising the issue with the TUC, backed by a 10-page document provided by PCAP." from the Newsletter of Preservation and Conservation of Animals and Plantlife, 29, Broughton Drive, Grassendale, Liverpool.

The Times of 25th January carried a report that one of the reasons underlying the government decision was a paper published in Nature by a Harwell team which voiced uncertainty about the stability of vitrified waste. The team concerned wrote to the editor on 28th January denying this, saying that "radiation effects will not cause a significant increase in leach rate over that of unirradiated glass in practical repository situations."

Planning of 8th January highlights the fact that the two concluded planning inqiries both found in favour of allowing the applications to drill. 'In the Scottish case the Reporter noted that loss of amenity and solitude would be a temporary deprivation. He went on "Regrettable as the intrusion could be, it would not counterbalance the national importance of the research".' The Assistant Director of the Town and Country Planning association has pointed out that Tom King asserted that the feasibility of burying high level nuclear waste had been established, and that 'nothing has emerged to indicate that it would be unacceptable'.

The Econmist for 30th January takes the view that 'for fear of a pre-election barney with environmentalists the Thatcher government has given up trying' to solve the high-level waste problem. Recalling that Mr Justice Parker believed scientists claims for a British solution to the problem ("Success can be confidently predicted") and noting opposition that 'highlanders disbelieved the scientists' the article says, 'The highlanders were right the scientists claims were bogus. The British government, after its scientists failure, should have sent them back to the drawing board. Instead it has taken the drawing board away !

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The Guardian of 12th Feb reports that 'The first of the Royal Navys nuclear powered submarines, the 20-year old HMS Dreadnought, is to be decommissioned at Chatham dockyard, where she has been lying since autumn with her reactor shut down because of cooling problems. The Defence ministry has not yet decided/what to do with the empty hull, part of which has been permanently contaminated with radioactivity, once the nuclear equipment and fuel elements have been removed. It is a problem that has neveer arisen before. Even the US Navy, which has a number of decommissioned submarines, has so far avoided the issue (!) by dumping them in the Florida swamps- although it did consider towing them out to sea and dumping them in a deep part of the Atlantic.'

For the moment the sealed hulk of HMS Dreadnought will simply be laid up "on a secure mooring". Mr Blaker, Armed Forces Minister said, in a statement to the Commons that he didn't know where this mooring should be.

'Whereever she ends up the decision to withdraw Dreadnought from service instead of refitting her will fuel the argument over the planned closure of Chatham dockyard. The local MP wants to know whether the ageing sub. would have been kept in service if the Chatham facility was still available to refit her. The workforce will certainly resent having to dismantle her, along with the dockyard and their livelihood. As one trade union leader put it, "There is no way they are going to get burned up with radiation just to clear up somebody elses mess". On the same day tenders were invited for a new nuclear sub.- SSN 17- to be built at Vickers in Barrow. (Emphasis added)

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The Times of 30th January reports that in a Pravda article Dr Pyotr Kapitsa "the Cambridge trained doyen of Soviet nuclear physicists" has suggested that nuclear waste should be packed into rockets and dumped in outer space. This apparently appeals to 'ecology concious Soviet Scientists'. Dr Kapitsa is 87. Currently Soviet waste is encased in bitumen or glass and then stored in underground chambers. "But liquid wastes from Soviet nuclear power stations are deposited in deep, water-bearing seams isolated from ground water. Some scientists consider this method unsafe."

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