



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

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NFLA response to Mike Weightman's interim nuclear safety review – bland reassurance when fundamental change is required

The Nuclear Free Local Authorities has highlighted a disturbing incongruence between the conclusions of the interim Weightman nuclear safety report on the implications of the Fukushima disaster for the UK nuclear industry, and its recommendations. (1) The conclusions largely gave the industry a clean bill of health – but the recommendations raise some important issues which are extensive, potentially very expensive and need to be implemented quickly. It is also disturbing that the regulator is putting the onus on the industry to say how it will implement the recommendations.

The interim review report arises as a result of the major damage to the Fukushima nuclear reactors – the worst nuclear accident since the Chernobyl disaster. A final report will be produced by Mike Weightman in mid September. The NFLA will be robustly participating in a stakeholder engagement event with the Office for Nuclear Regulation in July (2), whilst fully participating in a detailed Westminster seminar next month, where key independent expert speakers will put forward the urgent need for fundamental change in the UK nuclear industry (3).

The Weightman review outlines 11 interim conclusions and 25 interim recommendations. The conclusions of the report largely suggest the UK nuclear industry has already got its house in order, while suggesting that the issues raised by the Fukushima incident are unlikely to be replicated in the UK. Yet the recommendations in the report suggest that the nuclear industry needs to make a series of detailed reviews across many aspects of emergency response, with a real worry over flooding risk (hidden away in the appendices), and various other health and safety issues in a detailed plant and site review for each nuclear facility.

The conclusion on flooding risk is downplayed by Weightman to say the least. The report notes that there is: “potential for flooding to occur in the near vicinity of nuclear sites”, but goes on to say that the actual flooding risk is unknown “because the detailed specific likelihood and consequences of flooding have not been assessed” by the regulators. (4) How then can this justify the Weightman conclusion: “Flooding risks are unlikely to prevent construction of new nuclear power stations at potential development sites in the UK over the next few years”? (5) Is this bland reassurance when there is actually need for fundamental change?

The NFLA wishes to see the 25 recommendations of the interim report put in place urgently. The NFLA is though highly concerned that Mike Weightman is largely leaving the nuclear industry to decide what to do with these recommendations – the NFLA believes they have to be fully and consistently enforced with a full and detailed audit trail.

In the end, it is no surprise to the NFLA that the report makes the conclusions that it does, as Mike Weightman made it very clear from the outset that he did not envisage the review would identify significant changes in practice. Given that HSE ONR has been responsible for implementing the nuclear safety regime in the UK, and that this regime is the same in principle as the Japanese regime, it would be astonishing if there had been any other conclusion.

However, it is quite clear that the Fukushima emergency is still very much an ongoing incident, and that it is far too early to draw any meaningful conclusions from the accident. This is even acknowledged by the UK Government, which asked for the Weightman review to deliver interim findings (published on the 18th May) and a later, more considered report in mid September (which is

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probably still far too early for full lessons to be learnt from Fukushima). To this limited extent, the recommendations taken by the review are not unreasonable: flagging up several areas where more study is needed during the weeks ahead. The NFLA though is very disappointed with the numerous additional bland reassurances made by Mike Weightman and Government Ministers on UK nuclear safety given as part of the public launch to the report and, to a certain extent, in the narrative part of the report.

The NFLA also points out a number of areas of concern that the report has simply not looked at, due to its very narrow remit. Obvious examples include:

- Proper discussion over the extent of the evacuated area around Fukushima in reference to the UK. The zone has now been extended from 20kms to up to 30kms in Japan, but the USA nuclear regulator suggests it should be as much as 80kms. UK guidance in nuclear accidents is lower than both, but this key issue is not adequately considered in the review.
- A thorough analysis of the extensive and dangerous radioactive discharges from the Fukushima reactors into the sea, airborne and on land. Why has the UK Government not tasked the Health Protection Agency, the Environment Agency or the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) to undertake similar reports as the Weightman review?
- The major logistical issues for the emergency services and local authorities for dealing with mass evacuation of tens of thousands of people. Hopefully, the final report will include an analysis of this from the Nuclear Emergency Planning Liaison Group, but the NFLA also believes the Cabinet Office's Civil Contingencies Secretariat, the Emergency Planning Society and senior emergency service personnel should be brought in to consider this aspect of the review.
- The suggestion made in Mike Weightman's press conference and the Government's official response (6), that the Government can now effectively go ahead with approving the National Nuclear Energy Policy Statements and Site Sustainability Assessments before the final safety report has been published. There are serious issues around semi-urban site selection criteria, interim waste storage issues, the site access situation and above all flooding that need to be reassessed following Fukushima.
- Site specific vulnerabilities including the effects of climate change over a long period of time and intergenerational equity.
- The German nuclear safety review (and the suggestion for EU 'stress tests' on nuclear reactors) has considered the impact of a plane hitting a nuclear reactor. It concluded that none of its reactors could withstand large passenger airlines hitting it, whilst the 7 oldest nuclear reactors could not even withstand a light airplane crashing into its reactors. (7)

The NFLA notes that in Germany its Government has also instigated an 'Ethics Commission' to report on the nuclear issue, and the moral rights and wrongs of operating nuclear plants in Germany following Fukushima, as well as of importing nuclear power from its neighbours. (8) This has led the German Chancellor to state that **all** nuclear reactors in the country will be closed by 2021. The NFLA calls on the UK Government to instigate such a commission as well as bringing in other agencies to look at the health and environmental effects of the Fukushima incident.

NFLA Chair Bailie George Regan says:

"The NFLA believes Mike Weightman's interim report is a real missed opportunity. The NFLA has consistently said it is disappointed with the very narrow nature of this review, which it feels is being developed to ensure little actually has to be done. This then allows no great delay to the nuclear new build timetable – the real desire of Ministers which the regulator clearly does not want to significantly affect in my view. It is time for a much broader and open review before we make fundamental

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decisions on our future energy use following this disaster. Germany, Japan and many other countries are taking this form of action to Fukushima – it is about time we did the same. I don't want bland reassurances; I want a fundamental and critical analysis of the risks of nuclear power following Fukushima.”

Ends

Further information: Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary 07771 930196.

Notes for editors:

- (1) Health and Safety Executive / Office for Nuclear Regulation, Interim Safety Report of the UK Chief Nuclear Inspector, 18th May 2011, <http://www.hse.gov.uk/nuclear/fukushima/interim-report.htm>
- (2) The ONR plans to meet with nuclear concerned groups at its offices in Bootle on 5th July.
- (3) Nuclear Consulting Group Westminster seminar – ‘Fukushima: Lessons Learned for New Nuclear Build’ chaired by Sir Jonathan Porritt with speakers including Dr John Large, Professor Steve Thomas, Professor Tom Burke and Dr Paul Dorfman. House of Commons, Committee Room 8, 14th June. Supported by the Nuclear Free Local Authorities and the group ‘No Need for Nuclear’. http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/events/Fukushima_Westminster_Seminar_flyer.pdf
- (4) Weightman interim review – Overall Conclusion 6.
- (5) Weightman interim review – Appendix on flooding risks.
- (6) DECC materials on interim nuclear safety report, 18th May 2011
http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/what_we_do/uk_supply/energy_mix/nuclear/nuclear.aspx
- (7) Rob Edwards, The Guardian, 18th May 2011
<http://www.robedwards.com/2011/05/uk-nuclear-power-stations-at-risk-of-flooding.html>
- (8) World Nuclear Association Weekly Digest, 19th May 2011.

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