



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

information

MEDIA ADVISORY – for immediate release, 1st December 2011

- **NFLA advocates that UK Government does not develop a new plutonium reprocessing facility at Sellafield**
- **New evidence of near catastrophic failure at Fukushima needs to be looked at by the Office for Nuclear Regulation**

The Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) fundamentally disagrees today with the UK Government's preferred policy for the long-term management of weapons-usable civil plutonium stocks.

Announcing its response to a public consultation on this policy (1), the UK Government has confirmed today that it will pursue a policy based on its preliminary view that reuse of plutonium as MOX fuel is the best available option to manage UK plutonium stocks. It has also noted that any remaining plutonium that cannot be converted into MOX will be immobilised and treated as waste for what they term as 'disposal'.

The NFLA responded in detail to this consultation, advocating that all UK weapons-usable civil plutonium should be immobilised and treated as waste for long-term safe storage (2). The NFLA has also previously noted the billions of pounds of taxpayers money that have been wasted on developing earlier MOX reprocessing facilities at Sellafield, and fears that billions more could be wasted again, at a time when it simply cannot be afforded as public spending cuts bite for another five years.

Furthermore, the NFLA is concerned about the potential radioactive discharges that could be emitted into the Irish Sea from such a facility – let us not forget that under the OSPAR Treaty the UK is committed to bringing radioactive discharges to as 'close to zero' as possible by 2020. However, for the first time in years it was reported that in 2010 discharges rates rose, entirely due to increases arising from the Sellafield facility, and are expected to do so for a few years more (3). In the NFLA's view, a new plutonium reprocessing facility is likely to see the UK potentially breach this Treaty commitment. It also sends out a negative international message at a time when nuclear weapons non-proliferation is being seriously threatened by events in Iran and North Korea.

The NFLA welcomes the Government's decision to undertaken further work before a specific decision is taken on whether or not to proceed with procuring a new MOX plant. This will include learning lessons from the previous plant as well as examining international best practice. In the NFLA's view, if the Government looks objectively at the sorry tale of UK reprocessing, it should conclude that it is in no way a value for money investment but an expensive folly the country can really do without.

This announcement comes at a time when it has just been reported that the Fukushima facility came within a whisker of a catastrophic failure. According to Japanese state broadcaster NHK (4): "The Tokyo Electric Power Company, or TEPCO, and several research institutes made public their analyses on the melting of fuel rods at three of the plant's units at a government-sponsored study meeting on Wednesday. The analyses were based on temperatures, amounts of cooling water and other data. TEPCO said that in the worse case, all fuel rods in the plant's Number 1 reactor may

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have melted and dropped through its bottom into a containment vessel. The bottom of the vessel is concrete covered with a steel plate.

The utility said the fuel may have eroded the bottom to a depth of 65 centimeters. The thinnest part of the section is only 37 centimeters thick. TEPCO also said as much as 57 percent of the fuel in the plant's Number 2 reactor and 63 percent in the Number 3 reactor may have melted, and that some of the melted fuel may have fallen through reactor vessels."

The NFLA is highly concerned about these startling new results and is urging the UK Chief Nuclear Inspector to reconsider the findings of the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) report on the Fukushima disaster.

NFLA Chair Brian Goodall said:

"I am disappointed to hear that the UK Government is considering developing a new plutonium reprocessing plant at Sellafield. Have they really not learnt the lesson from the costly experience of the Sellafield MOX plant or the Thorp plant, both of which were billions over budget and hugely inefficient in operation? I urge the UK Government to make a rigorous and objective value for money study and rather opt for the sensible, safer and I am sure cheaper alternative – immobilisation and storage as a waste. As we hear how close we came to a catastrophe at Fukushima we should not be looking to develop such a plant at Sellafield."

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For further information and interview opportunities contact Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary on 00 44 (0)161 234 3244 or 00 44 (0)7771 930196.

Notes for editors:

- (1) See 'Charles Hendry Written Ministerial Statement on Nuclear Energy Matters', DECC website, 1st December 2011:
http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/news/ch_nuclearmatt/ch_nuclearmatt.aspx
- (2) See NFLA website, 21st September 2009:
http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/consultations/DECC_response_210909.pdf
- (3) Reported at the OSPAR Radiation Substances Committee, Monte Carlo, March 2011.
- (4) See NHK World, 30th November 2011:
http://www.nhk3.org.jp/daily/english/20111130_39.html

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