Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

information

NFLA Media release – for immediate release, 17th March 2015

NFLA publish briefing on small modular nuclear reactors – uncertain technology, uncosted designs and unlikely to be developed without massive public investment

The Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) publishes today a detailed assessment of the prospects for the development of what are called Small Modular Nuclear Reactors (SMRs) – a technology mooted for use in both the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

The NFLA briefing (1) acknowledges a renewed interest in this technology, particularly as the burgeoning costs and associated problems besetting large new nuclear projects like Hinkley Point C are threatening the dramatic collapse of the nuclear 'renaissance' in the UK. (2) SMR technology is also being considered as part of Ireland's future energy mix, with an Irish Government White Paper expected to consider it when published this summer. (3)

SMRs have been advocated by the UK Parliamentary Energy and Climate Change Committee, and the UK Government has tasked the National Nuclear Laboratory with considering the 'technical challenges' involved in developing them.

In its detailed report, NFLA concludes:

- Disquiet over the high cost and delays at Hinkley Point C have led to questioning whether the long-established conventional wisdom that bigger units are cheaper than small reactors is any longer true.
- For some in the nuclear industry SMRs are seen as a way to reduce costs and speed up construction by using large-scale standardised manufacturing that will churn out dozens, if not hundreds, of identical plants, each of which would ultimately produce cheaper kilowatt-hours than larger one-off designs.
- However, to do this NFLA argue there would need to be built a massive supply chain.
- Money for that would presumably come from customer orders – but there aren't any such orders and there is little evidence of any substantial orders coming in for some considerable time, if at all.
- No SMR has yet been commercialised anywhere in the world, and work on them has been waning because the developers cannot find such a market for them.
- None of the designs, including the most credible, which are based on scaled-down versions of currently deployed Pressurised Water Reactor (PWR) technology, is yet ready.
- The safety licensing process that will need to follow design completion would, according to the Chief UK Nuclear Inspector, take up to 6 years in the UK. It could be even longer in the Republic of Ireland, where such a comprehensive regulatory regime does not at present exist.
- The cost of SMRs is essentially unknowable at the moment, but there is evidence to suggest they will be even more expensive than existing large-scale nuclear reactors.
- The fact that the UK (and possibly Irish) Governments are considering what sort of process might be needed to propose new sites for nuclear reactors does show that both are serious about including them as part of a long-term nuclear / energy strategy.
- What is most worrying to the NFLA about these future nuclear scenarios is that the UK Government (and perhaps the Irish Government as well) is failing to develop alternative non-nuclear scenarios to replace them when they turn out to have been a delusion, which the NFLA believe them to be.
- In the NFLA's view, the political will of both the UK and Irish Governments should rather be focused on the non-nuclear scenarios of developing a wide renewable energy mix, energy efficiency and microgeneration programmes, some of which can be actively developed by local government.

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UK and Ireland NFLA Steering Committee Chair, Councillor Mark Hackett, said:
"I welcome the publication of this NFLA briefing on small nuclear reactors, which I believe bursts the bubble of this new type of nuclear development. They may sound great on paper, but as is usual the industry has found huge problems in developing the technology. For such technology to prosper, large levels of customer orders would be required for them. This seems highly unlikely whilst issues over their cost and the generic technology remain unresolved. As with larger nuclear reactors, they are not part of a nuclear renaissance but rather a nuclear chimera. With the potential of large-scale and small-scale renewable energy being realised across the UK and Ireland with ever impressive regularity, it would be a major policy mistake for the UK and Irish Governments to pursue this new nuclear project. If they do, it will turn into the same type of nightmare to policymakers and the industry as Hinkley Point C has become."

Ends

For more information on this media release please contact Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary on 0161 234 3244 / 07771 930196 or Pete Roche, NFLA Policy Advisor on 0131 444 1445.

Notes for editors:
(1) The NFLA New Nuclear Monitor No 37 on small modular nuclear reactors is attached with this briefing and will shortly go on the NFLA website – http://www.nuclearpolicy.info.
(2) NFLA Media Release, February 9th 2015, 'More delays for Hinkley Point C?'
(3) Interview with the Irish Energy Minister Alex White, Irish Independent, December 31st 2014 http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/we-cannot-rule-out-use-of-nuclear-power-minister-30872861.html

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