

EURADWASTE '04

Summary of the sessions on EC policy and socio-political issues

Promoting safety and protecting society

The opening day of Euradwaste '04 focused on European Commission policy, including the proposed Directives on disposal of radioactive waste and nuclear safety and socio-political aspects including governance and decision making, public perception/acceptance of waste disposal and its sustainability. A decision on the proposed package will now be made after Union enlargement. Public agreement on the siting of disposal facilities is controversial and more important now than technical questions in terms of achieving a permanent disposal solution. Issues and suggestions for achieving constructive dialogue were discussed and methodologies compared.

The debate on security of the European energy supply highlighted the need for a safe, permanent and publicly acceptable solution for nuclear waste. Nuclear safety in an enlarged European Union must also be ensured. "The nuclear option remains open in countries that want to use it," said Derek Taylor of the European Commission. Safety must be compatible with EU policy for all accession states and has been part of the accession agreements with all new Member States.

The nuclear package

The package consists of two EU Directives on the general principles of nuclear safety in the EU and on nuclear waste management. Its main aim is to harmonise differing practices across the Union on safety and waste management. In particular, it requests each Member State to define a programme, including disposal, for the management of all its radioactive waste within a defined time frame. The original proposal also sought to ensure adequate funds for decommissioning activities at nuclear power plants – a major industrial undertaking with high associated costs – and a highly sensitive issue that needs to be reconciled with a future competitive market in electricity.

The package has had an eventful passage through the various European Institutions and various arguments and controversies were presented at the conference. In January, the European Parliament voted in favour of the package with amendments (in particular, a stronger wording on decommissioning) to the original EC text – however its role is consultative in this instance and the final decision rests with the Council of Ministers with debate continuing in the Atomic Questions Group (AQG).

The main controversies include whether binding legislation or non-binding guidance is introduced, the flexibility of the timetable for building waste repositories (each Member State would be responsible for its own waste), the nature of nuclear safety inspections, and whether EU legislation will add value to established international conventions (e.g. under the auspices of the IAEA). The text that is currently being discussed in AQG has been significantly thinned-down, but the Commission may propose a new text for consideration by the AQG that will address controversial issues and introduce greater flexibility.

Rene Dempsey, Chair of the AQG, felt the debate had been healthy for Europe: “The extension of the debate into the enlarged European Union will allow for a more open democratic voice. It is important for an open and consensual debate on this crucial package.” Rene is confident of success in obtaining consensus around a binding agreement to manage waste and safety issues with decommissioning funding included. There is a clear need to harmonise safety and ensure fair competition: safety must be high and equivalent across Europe.

Disposal – publicly acceptable?

As the next two days of the conference demonstrated, deep geological disposal is now technically feasible, although societal concerns limit its application in many Member States. From an ethical point of view, our generation should take responsibility for our nuclear waste and not hand it on to future generations. However, although this generic truth is recognised, the NIMBY (not in my back yard) reaction at a local level makes siting a repository extremely difficult: nuclear waste management is a global problem looking for a very local solution.

Claes Thegerstrom from the Swedish SKB emphasised the need to promote dialogue with local populations to build trust. Open democratic exchange is important with transparent decision-making processes: “Building trust is important as people do mind, do care and will dare to make a decision – if they have trust.”

Yves Le Bars, Chair of the French radioactive waste agency, coordinated a panel debate on public involvement and believes that an effective contract with a host community is essential: “The community needs to understand how much waste will be stored – the inventory – and no change to that can be tolerated without further discussion and agreement.” In France, he sees a change where local politicians are coming to the technical authorities to suggest sites rather than the authorities selecting a site and trying to convince a local community of the safety factor.

Working with communities in an incremental step-wise basis is important. Joint multinational repositories could be problematic with the public and it must be made clear that no country can be compelled to take waste from another country against its will.

Several studies were presented on initiating and sustaining dialogue with communities (e.g. Riscom and Cowam) that have shown successful structured dialogue methodologies to achieve consensual conclusions. For a truly local democratic solution, local actors need access to unbiased expertise to participate meaningfully. Achieving agreement on a site is not easy – all parties are ‘stretched’ – time, patience and clearly articulated benefits for the local community are necessary.