Evidence from the Chair of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee Call for Evidence on Radioactive Waste Management

Introduction

1. This response to the call for evidence is from the Chair of the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM). While it has been discussed with CoRWM Members, it has not been agreed in a plenary meeting.

2. CoRWM was established in 2003 to advise the Government on the method (or methods) to be adopted for the long-term management of the UK's higher activity radioactive wastes (HAW).\(^1\) It reported in 2006 and recommended geological disposal, preceded by robust interim storage and accompanied by an intensified programme of research and development (R&D) (CoRWM, 2006). The UK Government accepted these recommendations and began to implement them (UK Government et al, 2006; Defra et al, 2007; Defra et al, 2008). In 2007 the Scottish Government decided against geological disposal and in favour of a policy of near-surface, near-site storage, while supporting R&D.

3. CoRWM was reconstituted in late 2007 with the role of carrying out scrutiny of the UK programme for the long-term management of HAW and providing independent advice to Government (Defra et al, 2007). It reports to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change and to the Environment Ministers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scope of CoRWM's Work

4. CoRWM’s Terms of Reference are to

> “provide independent scrutiny and advice to UK Government and devolved administration Ministers on the long-term management, including storage and disposal, of radioactive waste. CoRWM's primary task is to provide independent scrutiny on the Government's and Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) proposals, plans and programmes to deliver geological disposal, together with robust interim storage, as the long-term management option for the UK's higher activity wastes.”

5. The “primary task” in paragraph 4 corresponds broadly to scrutiny of the Government’s Managing Radioactive Waste Safely (MRWS) programme. CoRWM takes it to include the conditioning and packaging of HAW, as well as its interim storage, and the transport of HAW between storage facilities and from these to a geological disposal facility. We take “proposals, plans and programmes” to include R&D and also public and stakeholder engagement (PSE).

6. In addition to its work on the MRWS programme, CoRWM carries out scrutiny and provides advice on the following topics:

- work by organisations other than NDA (e.g. British Energy, Ministry of Defence) on the long-term management of the existing and committed HAW that they own

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\(^1\) HAW includes both high level waste (HLW) and intermediate level waste (ILW).

\(^2\) "Committed waste" is waste that will arise in future from the operation or decommissioning of existing nuclear facilities. (As distinct from existing waste, which already exists, and new build waste, which will only arise if new facilities are built.)

\(^3\) Sometimes the term "legacy wastes" is used instead of existing and committed wastes.
• waste-related aspects of plans for the long-term management of spent fuels, plutonium and uranic materials
• plans for the long-term management of spent fuel and ILW from new nuclear power stations (“new build wastes”)
• the Scottish Government’s development of its policy framework for the long-term management of HAW.

**CoRWM’s Work in 2008 and 2009**

7. In the two years after its reconstitution in late 2007, CoRWM prepared and submitted three reports to Government. These reports cover:

• conditioning, packaging, storage and transport of HAW, and the management of spent fuels, plutonium and uranic materials (CoRWM, 2009a)
• geological disposal of HAW (CoRWM, 2009b)
• R&D for interim storage and geological disposal of HAW, and management of spent fuels, plutonium and uranic materials (CoRWM, 2009c).

8. For each report we gathered evidence from and held meetings with NDA and other waste owners, regulators (the Health and Safety Executive, the environment agencies) and other stakeholders such as Local Authorities for existing nuclear sites, communities near those sites, NGOs, Research Councils and Learned Societies. We then produced a first draft of the report and checked its factual accuracy with selected stakeholders, including Government and NDA. We carried out consultation on a second draft of the report via our website (www.corwm.org.uk) and via a stakeholder workshop. We published the results of these consultations on our website, with the reports.

**CoRWM’s Current Work**

**Geological Disposal**

9. One part of our current work on geological disposal consists of scrutinising progress in the voluntarism and partnership approach to the siting of a geological disposal facility (GDF). This includes attending meetings of the West Cumbrian MRWS Partnership as an observer and monitoring Government initiatives in other areas about the invitation to express an interest in holding discussions about hosting a GDF. With respect to Cumbria, we are also scrutinising the British Geological Survey work to screen out unsuitable areas.

10. Our scrutiny of NDA work covers its planning for the implementation of geological disposal, its development of a generic “Disposal System Safety Case” and its formulation of a geological disposal R&D programme. This programme will begin the implementation of the R&D strategy the NDA published last year and on which CoRWM commented at the draft stage (NDA, 2009). We are also scrutinising NDA’s implementation of its PSE framework for geological disposal and its processes for producing a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

**HAW Conditioning, Packaging, Storage and Transport**

11. Our focus for 2010 on conditioning, packaging and storage of HAW is the NDA’s development of its HAW “topic strategy”. This will reach a key stage in the summer and will feed into the second NDA overall strategy (“Strategy II”), which will be the subject of a public consultation in the late summer and the autumn. We are currently considering what work to carry out on transport of HAW. At some point we will look at transport logistics and infrastructure requirements but we do not think it is urgent to do this.
Spent Fuels, Plutonium, Uranic Materials

12. The NDA is developing topic strategies for Magnox fuel, oxide fuels, exotic fuels, plutonium and uranic materials. We are following waste-related aspects of its work. In addition, we may also respond to the forthcoming UK Government consultation on the long-term management of plutonium.

New Build Wastes

13. We are preparing a statement of CoRWM’s current position on new build wastes and a response to the Government consultation on the draft National Policy Statement for new nuclear power stations. To ensure that we understand the proposals for managing new build wastes, we have held meetings with the regulators’ Generic Design Assessment (GDA) team and with the companies whose reactor designs are being assessed in the GDA (the “Requesting Parties”, Westinghouse and EDF/AREVA).

Scottish Government Policy

14. We advised the Scottish Government on the preparation of its draft policy framework and accompanying SEA. Now that the consultation on these has begun (Scottish Government, 2010), we are holding meetings with a number of stakeholders to gather information. We will then prepare a formal response to the consultation. After this, we will evaluate the whole of the Scottish Government’s policy development process, including its PSE activities and how it has taken into account the views of the public and stakeholders.

CoRWM’s Assessment of Its Own Performance

15. CoRWM has devised three criteria by which it will judge its own success. These are that CoRWM:

- is considered to be a trusted and authoritative source of advice
- carries out its work to a high standard and to time and budget
- has demonstrable positive effect on UK programmes for the long-term management of HAW.

16. We judge our success by asking stakeholders and the public for their views on the Committee’s performance. We do this by letter, via our website and at our own PSE events. We intend to internally review whether we are meeting our success criteria through discussions at plenary meetings, about twice per year.

Government Responses to CoRWM’s Recommendations

17. Government has responded to two of our 2009 reports (DECC et al, 2009; DECC & DoENI, 2009). A response to the other report is expected shortly.

18. We have discussed the Government responses in our plenary meetings and have decided to judge Government by its actions, rather than its words. We recognise that some of the issues on which we have made recommendations are difficult and that it will take Government time to decide what to do about them.

19. The response to our geological disposal report is recent (November 2009) and it is too soon to reach a judgement on it. The Government response to our report on interim storage was issued in July 2009. Thus far, neither the Government nor any other organisation mentioned in the response appears to have taken any major actions to meet our recommendations. We are continuing to monitor developments.
References


