

Summary

Expert Hearing

Nuclear Waste – Will the Directive Solve the Problem?

8th June 2010, 13.00 - 15.00, ASP 1 E 1, European Parliament

Nuclear waste from nuclear power plants is one of the most toxic and most persistent substances mankind produces, but a solution how the highly dangerous waste can be stored safely is yet to be found.

In the EU, it is the Commission as well as the relevant Council working groups and ENEF (European Nuclear Energy Forum) who are trying to find a way to deal with the problem of final waste disposal. In autumn, the Commission is expected to present a proposal for a nuclear waste regulation to create common rules for nuclear waste storage and disposal in the EU.

In response to these ongoing official and lobby activities the hearing gathered independent experts and NGOs to present examples for nuclear waste strategies from Germany and Sweden. Against the backdrop of these experiences, lessons with respect to the Draft Nuclear Waste regulation were drawn.



German Nuclear Test Storage Facility "Asse"

HIGHLIGHTS OF PRESENTATIONS

In her welcoming statement **Rebecca Harms**, co-president of the Greens/EFA, looked back to the first hearing on current nuclear projects in April 2010. She introduced the issue of nuclear waste management in the EU and stressed that no solution has been presented to the disposal problem.

Greek MEP **Anni Podimata** of the S&D Group gave an overview of nuclear power production, the problem of limited uranium supplies and objected to the nuclear industry claim to contribute to the fight against climate change. She also pointed out that *a majority of 82% European citizens say nuclear waste management should be regulated at EU level*, according to the Special Eurobarometer survey "Europeans and Nuclear Safety" and demanded a "transparent assessment of the results of the consultation."

Heinz Smital, a nuclear physicist working for Greenpeace Germany, gave a historical overview of the deficient licensing procedure for nuclear disposal sites in Germany. Originally, a list with potentially suitable geological sites was prepared. Even though Gorleben was not on that list, for political reasons it was chosen as a final disposal site. The problems with the nuclear waste sites Asse and Gorleben were foreseeable, but ignored. For nuclear waste management Heinz Smital recommended a site safety case for one million years. He further demanded to maintain a clear timeline for a nuclear phase out. The production of toxic nuclear waste should be forbidden just like the production of other toxic wastes. Also tailings from uranium mining need to be included in the concept.

Rebecca Harms added that prior to German re-unification western countries criticized the safety of GDR Morsleben storage. Yet after unification, Environmental Minister Angela Merkel quickly decided to maintain the Morsleben storage, which came handy during the Wuergassen NPP decommissioning.

Johan Swahn, physicist and director of MKG, the Swedish NGO office for Nuclear Waste Review, gave a key presentation on the much discussed Swedish and Finnish "solution" for nuclear waste. MKG is financed by a public nuclear waste fund which enables the NGO to participate in the Swedish decision-making process on nuclear waste repositories.

Sweden intends to apply copper canisters and clay buffers for long term environmental safety, a method unique in its reliance on artificial barriers. The system is supposed to be retrievable so that waste can be taken back whenever necessary. Johan Swahn doubts how the canisters could be retrieved from storage sites well below sea level. Since there is strong criticism on the concept it is yet unclear if it will be approved in the upcoming licensing procedure. Johan Swahn underlined that an independent regulator is key to establish a sound nuclear waste disposal scheme, especially since Sweden serves as the blueprint for the Finnish waste management.

Mykle Schneider, independent consultant, based in Paris, outlined requirements a meaningful directive should meet. Currently only a 2003 Commission proposal on nuclear waste management is available. He criticized the insufficient definition of nuclear waste and requested the inclusion of radioactive discharges, mining wastes, spent nuclear fuel and military wastes. He considers it urgent to deal with "historical wastes" and to prohibit reprocessing. The public should be granted full access to comprehensive information and be involved in the decision-making process. To follow up on the 2007 EP resolution asking to apply the polluter-pays-principle in nuclear waste disposal, an independent cost assessment is needed. Further the availability of funds at any moment needs to be insured. Schneider expressed concerns over a "latent further internationalization" of waste processing and disposal.

In the following debate David Lowry, independent consultant, added that the right of citizens to information also means that industry should not have the right to erase information before it is handed over to citizens. Jan Haverkamp, Greenpeace EU Unit agreed and demanded that the general waste directive should also apply for radioactive residues. The participants called for an open, serious and responsible debate based on reliable scientific data.

TIMELINE

In May 2010 a public online consultation organized by DG-TREN was completed. Yet, the consultation framework has been criticised for not allowing sufficient room for serious stakeholder input. According to the latest information the Commission is still undecided if its initiative will translate into a directive or another legal form. Commissioner Oettinger hinted that a decision would be taken at a higher political level near the time of a College meeting.

Impact Assessment and the draft regulation should be completed in July/August. Interservice consultation can then take place in September/October. The European Parliament committees ENVI and ITRE and the Atomic Questions Group Coreper will address the issue in October, a hearing will be organized at the ITRE committee. The directive is to be presented to the European Council in March 2011.