

New dump for nuclear waste is planned

THE CENTRAL Electricity Generating Board wants to build a giant nuclear dump to store spent fuel from its nuclear power stations. The dump will hold the highly-radioactive waste until it can be taken to British Nuclear Fuel's Sellafield works for reprocessing to extract uranium and plutonium.

The dump is necessary because BNFL's new THORP reprocessing plant, which should be in operation by 1990, will not be able to handle the volumes of waste that will be produced by Britain's power stations in the mid-1990s.

The dump will be run by the CEBG and will require planning permission. No site has so far been proposed but, wherever it is, another row over nuclear waste seems certain.

It will receive waste from both the new Advanced Gas-Cooled Reactors (AGRs) now coming into operation, and future Pressurised-Water Reactors (PWRs), like the proposed Sizewell B station. The plans for the dump are spelt out for the first time in evidence from the CEBG to the Sizewell inquiry, now in its fourth week.

The THORP facility, which was the subject of the long-running Windscale public inquiry in the mid-1970s, is expected to have a life of 10 years. It should be able to handle all spent fuel from the AGR programme up to 1997 and any PWR fuel—from Sizewell and the proposed Hinckley Point reactor—produced up to 1995.

John Wright, the director of the CEBG's technology planning and research division, told the inquiry: "Whilst THORP may continue to operate beyond 10 years, it is not thought prudent to plan on this basis. It is therefore assumed that the later arisings of irradiated fuel from the currently-committed AGR stations and virtually all the arisings from any future nuclear power stations (including Sizewell B) will need to be reprocessed in plants that succeed THORP."

The CEBG is already at work on a design to store to keep AGR fuel in a dry, gaseous and non-corrosive atmosphere for long periods. "Progress to date gives a high degree of confidence of success," says Wright. "It is unlikely that the store could be operational before around 1990 but it should be available in time to provide flexibility to the timing of the reprocessing plants that will be needed in succession to THORP."

Roger Milne, Snape



Homeless waste

The picture of the fuel cycle now emerging at that inquiry suggests that large quantities of spent fuel from nuclear power stations are going to have to be stored three times: first underwater in ponds at each power station; secondly, at the new repository, and thirdly, after reprocessing—until such time as the British government decides how to dispose of high-level nuclear waste.

Last week the inquiry was assured that sufficient supplies of uranium were available to meet the likely world demand in the coming 50 years. At present, the CEBG has sufficient uranium stockpiled or guaranteed under contract to fuel the nuclear programme until the end of this decade. Its controversial contract with Rio-Tinto Zinc for Namibian supplies ends next year. The only other important contract, with the Canadian company Rio Algon, is due to end early in the 1990s. Over 90 per cent of uranium used in the non-Communist world comes from the United States, Canada, Australia and Africa. The British Civil Uranium Procurement Organisation is keen to get directly involved in mining and exploration. It is participating in projects in North America, Australia and Africa.

Green fields beyond Greenfield

THE GREENFIELD report, published this week, calls on the British government to save money by buying more unbranded "generic" drugs for the National Health Service. But, in Greece, the socialist government is intent on much grander measures.

Measures passed in December include: a national drug company to buy from foreign companies and sell generic drugs without brand names (at low prices); a limit of three versions of any one drug to be on sale and a special tax on foreign drug firms to pay for the national company.

Formula failure

THE WORLD Health Organisation has once again turned down an application from the Council for Infant Formula Companies (ICIFI) to affiliate to the Geneva-based organisation. The latest rebuff to the manufacturers of substitutes for breast milk came in a three secret session of the WHO's executive board.

The refusal, the third in as many years, is a symbolic trial of strength indicating the political balance of power within the WHO. Delegates from the United States had lobbied hard for the ICIFI to be affiliated.

Environment boost

THE EUROPEAN Community could spend up to \$12 million dollars a year on the environment, if a proposal made this week by the Commission is approved by a council of ministers. The commission wants two environment funds, one for conservation and one to promote clean technologies—both to be effective in 1984. Each fund would receive \$1.5 million in the first year of the scheme, increasing to \$6 million by 1987. The money in the conservation fund would be available for buying or safe-guarding "sensitive areas of community interest".

Safety slashed

THE HEALTH and Safety Commission has slashed its programme of issuing regulations and guidance notes to ribbons. Two years ago the commission published a list of more than 100 projects. Less than 25 have been completed and the latest plan aims to finish only 26 projects during the next two years. The latest Plan for work reports that staffing levels now are almost as low as in 1974, when the executive was formed. But the executive is responsible for looking after the safety of 6 million more workers.

More than 500 jobs at the HSE have gone since 1980. More will have to go in order to recruit the highly-paid staff from the nuclear industry to look after the nuclear installations' inspectorate's work on Britain's revived nuclear power programme.



Science policy goes Dutch

THE DUTCH government has transferred part of its science-policy department from the ministry of education and science to the ministry of economic affairs. The move, by the new coalition of Liberals and Christian Democrats, satisfies the Dutch confederation of industry, which has lobbied for more support for industrial R&D and innovations.

The new department will have responsibility for the Dutch Institute for Energy Research, the Dutch end of the European Space Agency, the Institute for Marine Research and for the promotion of microelectronics, and biotechnology.

AIDS: transfusion patients may be at risk

AMERICAN scientists are scouring the country for the first case of the bizarre new disease "acquired immuno-deficiency syndrome" (AIDS) in patients who have undergone major surgery.

The hunt for the cause of the disease, which was first diagnosed among male homosexuals, has now labelled as a prime suspect some unknown blood-borne virus.

In just one year the list of people at risk from AIDS has lengthened from male homosexuals, drug-abusers and Haitians, to include the entire population.

In the last year a task force under Dr Harold Jaffe at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia has found seven cases of

AIDS among haemophiliacs who do not fall into any of the other categories. Jaffe believes that the spread of the disease may be connected with new preparations of factor VIII concentrate—the blood-clotting agent given to haemophiliacs—which are made up from blood from large numbers of donors, rather than one individual.

If this is correct, any patient in hospital who is given a blood transfusion could be at risk if one of the donors of the blood carries the virus.

*No cases of AIDS among British haemophiliacs have been reported so far—even though 50 per cent of the factor VIII used in Britain comes from the US. Omar Sattaar