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Cabinet to make recommendations on disposal of low level radioactive waste

The ongoing issue of what should be done with low level radioactive waste produced at Sellafield will be considered by Cumbria County Council's Cabinet next week (Tuesday August 25).

Cabinet members are considering the council's response to a consultation launched by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority on June 5 on their proposed national strategy for the management of solid low level radioactive waste (LLW) arising from the UK's nuclear industry.

The proposed council response being considered by Cabinet members is that LLW produced at Sellafield should be disposed of near to Sellafield and should not be dispersed in sites further afield in West Cumbria.

Unlike high level radioactive waste and intermediate level waste, LLW does not normally require special shielding during handling or transport. Operational LLW typically arises from routine monitoring and maintenance activities at Sellafield and includes plastic, paper, tissue, clothing, wood and metallic items. Decommissioning LLW mostly comprises building rubble, soil and various metal plant, equipment and other items. In terms of volume, metal [37%] and soil/rubble [33%] are the two largest types of LLW.

The UK radioactive waste inventory estimates that LLW makes up some 90% of the total volume of the UK's radioactive waste but contains less than 0.0003% of the total radioactivity. Current figures state that the UK produces 25,000 cubic metres of LLW per year - enough to fill 10 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

The situation is particularly important in Cumbria because more than two-thirds of the waste which is bulkiest in volume but lowest in radioactivity originates from Sellafield. Most of this waste is expected to be produced between now and 2030. The low level radioactive waste repository (LLWR), near Drigg, is the only dedicated engineered LLW disposal facility in the UK. It's estimated to have a potential capacity of 0.7m cubic metres, but the UK nuclear industry is expected to produce 3m cubic metres of LLW over the lifetime of NDA sites (approximately 120 years).

This gap between estimated arisings and capacity will mean finding alternative ways to manage LLW, including new treatment and alternative disposal routes.

The county council's response being considered by Cabinet warns against dispersing the waste in sites further afield in West Cumbria. "Sites in West Cumbria are already coming forward from the supply chain without any apparent serious consideration of the option to accommodate the waste at or adjacent to Sellafield where it is likely to generate less public concern... This will continue without clearer direction in the strategy to as far as possible treat and dispose of the waste on or adjacent to the Sellafield site rather than disperse it around West Cumbria," says the report.

The county council's proposed response supports the emphasis on improved waste management including waste avoidance, minimisation, re-use and treatment to reduce the amount of waste needing final disposal. However, it states that there should be a more proactive approach from the NDA to manage the waste on-site at nuclear installations.

Cllr Tim Knowles, Cumbria County Council's Cabinet member responsible for environment, said:

"We all appreciate that something has to be done with low level radioactive waste but my concern is that communities around West Cumbria should not be faced with the uncertainty of whether this waste is being disposed of in a landfill or other facility near them. Waste produced at Sellafield should be managed at or near Sellafield."

ENDS

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