

NDA Radioactive Waste Management Directorate

File Note

Informal meeting held on Friday 12 March 2011 at RWMD's Harwell office

Present;

Mr Chris McDonald (CM) Planning Inspector for the Nirex inquiry, now retired
Dr Cherry Tweed (CT) NDA, RWMD
Mr Alun Ellis (AE) NDA, RWMD

The meeting was held at AE's request following email correspondence with CM. The purpose of the meeting was to improve CT and AE understanding of the objections that led to the conclusion of the Nirex inquiry and to discuss how the approach being followed now can be influenced by the lessons of the past.

It was agreed that a note of the meeting would be produced by AE, suitable for use in response to queries.

The first part of the meeting focussed on the Nirex inquiry in the 1990s and concerns raised by CM in his role as Planning Inspector.

- CM identified that a significant concern for the inquiry was the apparent upward flow of groundwater in the Borrowdale Volcanic Group (BVG) rocks into the overlying sedimentary flow system. It was noted that the issue of upward groundwater flow needs to be considered in the context of the stability of a potential site and the requirements for isolation and containment.
- Assertions that the whole of west Cumbria has been excluded because of this concern were not correct, bearing in mind that the inquiry was looking a specific site in one geological setting. However Nirex 97 would not have changed the inquiry's conclusions even though it did present new information regarding groundwater flows.
- Claims made by Nirex to be taking a conservative approach when this could not be substantiated, and the perception that reliance was being placed by Nirex on the "chemical barrier" to overcome complex geology were also of concern.

The meeting then discussed a number of topics relevant to the current process:

- Advances in computing capability and 3D modelling since the early 1990s. It was agreed that it may now be possible to give more confidence regarding groundwater flows than was possible at the time of the inquiry. Modelling capability is relevant when considering complexity; however the need to convince people should not be forgotten.
- The difference between the Nirex ILW disposal concept of the 1990s and the types of waste now being considered. The "single facility" was discussed, in which HLW and ILW were disposed in separate underground areas, accessed by a single shaft or drift.
- The role of geology in the MRWS process. It was agreed that it is important to remember that geological criteria not considered during the recent BGS screening would be considered later in the siting process. This reflected the availability of information not the importance of the criteria. It was also noted that further and more extensive surface based investigations would be required if the Longlands Farm site were to be looked at again.
- The siting process. CM expressed the view that international guidance and standards with regard to siting of a facility is now less prescriptive than at the time of

the inquiry. There was a discussion on the implications of a siting process based on voluntarism of the current generation for a long-term project of this type with significant potential impacts for future generations. CM made a similar point regarding the weighting of transport (which affects the current generation only) in decision making.

- Planning issues including; “alternatives” and voluntarism, the implications of international agreements and the likely views of the Irish Government and the likelihood and advantages of a planning inquiry (if the new major infrastructure arrangements are not applied).

The meeting concluded with a summary from CM of issues for NDA to consider;

- The concerns raised by the Nirex inquiry regarding the site selection process, complex geology and the need to comply with international standards and guidance and apparent over reliance on the chemical barrier would need to be addressed by the current process if they applied to any sites being considered.
- The addition of heat-generating wastes to the disposal inventory introduced issues regarding the effects of heat input and the needs for segregation between different disposal concepts.
- In the light of developments since the 1990s it is appropriate to consider sites in west Cumbria which have community support but seeking to identify sites with potentially simpler geological settings than Longlands Farm is critical.
- The legal and political challenges (including from other countries) should not be underestimated.

AE thanked CM for taking the time to visit the Harwell office and for the useful discussion.

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