

Handling drums of low-activity radioactive waste in an underground store.



Radioactive waste decisions – having your say

Would you want a radioactive waste disposal site in your neighbourhood? Before you say, “No thanks,” have a think – there might be benefits. Job opportunities, better roads, improved health facilities ... But how does a government decide where to put such a dump? And how can citizens affect the decision-making process? Jill Sutcliffe discusses how governments try to involve their citizens in decision-making.

Making policy in a democracy

The UK government has increasingly emphasised the importance of finding out the views of members of the public and there has been a steady flow of consultations on different policies – energy, planning and, in the summer of 2007, how to implement policy for managing radioactive waste safely. These are areas where science has an important part to play in decision-making.

Our nuclear power stations supply about 20% of the UK’s electricity. Their spent fuel and other wastes contain highly-radioactive substances – see *CATALYST* Vol 14 issue 4. This **nuclear legacy** has to be managed and disposed of safely. But how, and where?

In 2003, the government set up an **independent committee**, the Committee on Radioactive Waste

Management (CoRWM), to recommend what should happen. CoRWM consulted a wide range of people and this aspect of their work was highly thought of.

CoRWM encouraged people to give their views on:

- the “inventory” (types and amounts) of existing radioactive wastes;
- the options for dealing with different types of waste.

In October 2006 the government accepted the following recommendations from CoRWM:

- Geological (underground) disposal should be adopted as the end point for long-term management of the most radioactive wastes.
- Robust storage in the interim will be needed.

The recommendations also emphasised that a repository should not be forced on a local community, but that “volunteers” would be sought to host it.

A wider consultation

In June 2007, the Government launched a consultation on its proposals for siting an underground waste repository. It published a document which posed a series of questions; groups and individuals were invited to send in their responses by a specified deadline.

Although an independent committee like CoRWM works independently of the government, its membership and terms of reference are decided by ministers.

Look here!

Watch some videos of CoRWM committee members explaining their work:
<http://tinyurl.com/23mrcn>

One of CoRWM's recommendations was that there should be more education in schools on the issue of radioactive waste. They ran a specific project with 15 schools in Bedfordshire. Students were introduced to the basics of the issue and then had to research answers to some questions. They then suggested how other pupils could be involved which enabled over 1300 young people aged 11-18 to take part.

Box 1 outlines two other ways in which the views of citizens have been gathered to inform policy-making where science is involved. The aim is to encourage people to engage with the issues and to study the evidence before they give their opinions.

Box 1 Informed opinion

Where scientific issues are involved, governments want to hear informed opinions rather than prejudices. Here are two ways in which they have tried to do this.

Citizens' Panels (also known as **Citizens' Juries**) involve a random selection of citizens who spend several days cross-questioning experts and coming to a shared conclusion. For CoRWM, four panels of 12-16 citizens met three times each to contribute to the process of deciding how to handle the nuclear waste legacy.

In **Joint Fact-Finding**, different interest groups set up a working party representing all sides of an issue. The working party tries to find shared answers to the most important questions, although they do not have to agree on every issue. Once people have worked together like this, they are more likely to reach an agreement on the remaining areas of dispute.

Each of these approaches has its pros and cons. The members of a **citizens' panel**, for example, need to be supported by staff who help them to question expert witnesses. The staff, known as facilitators, must not try to push the panel to reach a particular conclusion.

One of the most important things about consultation is that decision-makers need to be genuinely prepared to change their proposals in the light of what people have to say, and make it clear how they took these views into account.

Dr Jill Sutcliffe is Project Officer with NuLeAF (Nuclear Legacy Advisory Forum), an organisation which aims to identify and promote a common, local government viewpoint on nuclear waste clean-up issues. Local authorities have a key role to play in enabling communities to decide on these issues.

Box 2 A second opinion

Governments don't always get things their own way. In February 2007, the campaigning environmental group Greenpeace won a Court case concerning the conduct of the government's consultation on its proposed energy policy, including how radioactive waste would be handled. The judge, Mr Justice Sullivan, stated that "something has gone clearly and radically wrong" with the consultation process. In his opinion, the review was "seriously flawed" and the process was "unfair" because insufficient and "misleading" information had been made available by the government.

Another way for citizens to make their views known – the Climate Camp at Heathrow Airport in August 2007. The campers were highlighting the role of air travel in climate change. Their banner says: WE ARE ARMED ... ONLY WITH PEER-REVIEWED SCIENCE

