

Press Releases - Sellafield

Double Threat to Dun Laoghaire - 14/10/00

Councillor Eoin Costello (FG) has said that the Sellafield threat to the people of Dun Laoghaire is now higher than it has ever been. He stated that this was due to two factors, the recent commissioning of the Mixed Oxide plant at Sellafield, which mixes plutonium and uranium from spent nuclear fuel to produce a product which is sold to Japanese and European customers. The second factor has been Britain's high-level involvement in the attacks on Afghanistan, which makes every facility in the UK a possible target for a terrorist attack.



According to Councillor Costello Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Council received a letter in April of this year from the UK Department of the Environment soliciting comments on whether the operation of the Sellafield MOX plant is justified. Councillor Costello urged that the Manager write back and inform the Department in no uncertain terms that the citizens of the county were completely opposed to any form of expansion of the facility at Sellafield.

Despite this, last month saw the announcement by the British Government that they were giving permission for the plant to go ahead. British Nuclear Fuels expects to begin fuel production within a number of months thus securing lucrative contracts from Japan and Europe.

Last year saw the sacking of the director of the Sellafield plant and other senior personnel in February as a result of the falsification of safety records at the plant, a damning report in March from the UK industry's own Nuclear Safety Inspectorate, falsification of safety data on export orders which led the Japanese to cancel their order with Sellafield in May and in December a critical report from the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland.

The second Sellafield threat comes from a possible terrorist attack. A conference of the watchdog on atomic energy, the International Atomic Energy Agency) identified Sellafield as a possible terrorist target. According to American expert Gordon Thompson a direct hit of a hijacked jet would release half the plant's stock of Caesium 137, 44 times more than that which was released by the Chernobyl disaster. This would result in two million cancers across Europe.

According to authorities at the plant the core processing facility it is well protected against possible attack. However Councillor Costello says that this is not where the real threat would come. It will come from damage to the huge tanks of radioactive liquid stored at the reprocessing plant.

A report from the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland found that the biggest source of danger to the Irish people was the assembly of these tanks holding liquid high-level radioactive waste, known as the Highly Active Storage Tanks or HASTs. The quantity of radioactive material in these tanks is such that an accident involving a major release to the atmosphere could have serious consequences at a considerable distance from the plant.

The Irish report later in the year also emphasised the inherent risks associated with the storage of high-level radioactive waste in liquid form. The UK Nuclear Inspector's report also found that the amount of high-level liquid waste continues to increase faster than BNFL can deal with it. The inspectorate has threatened legal sanctions if the backlog of liquid waste is not cleared.

In May of last year Councillor Costello collected a petition of over 280 signatures calling for the closure of Sellafield. He sent a copy of the petition to the UK authorities and to Joe Jacob, the government minister with responsibility for pursuing the closure of Sellafield. In the Minister's reply Joe Jacob informed Councillor Costello that both himself and the Taoiseach had called for the closure of Sellafield.

According to Councillor Costello the time for such empty gestures and mock indignation from the Government is long past and now is the time for concerted legal action. According to Councillor Costello the people of Dun Laoghaire are poorly served by a government who bluster at their Ard Fheis about calls for the closure of Sellafield but it is left up to voluntary organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth to do the hard work of taking legal action to overturn the decision by the British government to approve operations at a mixed oxide fuel plant at Sellafield. For further information please see www.eoincostello.ie