

Monday 25th February, Session 5, Turquoise Room

“Democracy in Long-term Waste Management and Disposal”

Co-chairs: John Mathieson, UK Nirex Ltd. (UK)
Mark Matthews, USDOE (USA)

Panel: Peter Nygård, President SKB (Sweden);
Hans Issler, President NAGRA (Switzerland);
Yves Le Bars, President Andra (France);
George Arens, Site Selection Adviser to President, BfS (Germany);
Alan Hooper Chief Scientific Adviser, Nirex (UK);
John Greeves Radwaste Management Divisional Director, USNRC (USA);
and
Sumio Masuda, Director, NUMO (Japan).

Facilitators: George Dials (Science and Engineering Applications (USA) and
Hans Codée Managing Director, COVRA (The Netherlands).

The aim of this Panel session was to bring together leading figures in national waste management programmes from around the world to discuss achieving stakeholder consensus.

Following introductions of the panel members by John Mathieson, Peter Nygård provided an assessment of common challenges facing the various national programmes and how these are being addressed. He noted that most countries had accepted geological disposal as a feasible technical solution but this had to be taken forward through “stepwise implementation” which addressed the societal as well as the technical issues. Other so-called solutions either shifted responsibility to future generations (e.g. long-term storage), violated international agreements (e.g. sea-bed or ice-sheet disposal) or required extensive research (e.g. transmutation).

Common components of the national stepwise approaches included safety, transparency, stakeholder participation, openness and volunteerism. Such a process had been formalised through the Environmental Impact Assessment procedure in Sweden (and other countries). He noted that the “decide announce defend” approach of site selection was now “dead” and had been replaced by the more acceptable “dialogue, discussion and decision” methodology. Realisation of a deep repository project had to be based on a clear national need, with a clear division of responsibilities between the various actors. High quality scientific work had to be underpinned by a transparent siting process which recognised the importance of local benefit packages and was built on social trust. The upshot was that whilst consensus may never be reached, a better understanding of the issues involved would ensue and public opinion would increase.

Following this overview, George Dials opened up the questioning by seeking the Panel’s views on balancing the scientific and technical issues with the public involvement - democratic aspects of gaining acceptance. Sumio Masuda stressed the importance of community benefits and volunteerism, noting that benefits could be direct (such as cash incentives), or indirect (such as providing employment), this in turn assisted in the building of trust.

Yves Le Bars mentioned that in France the “technicians” were not in charge of decision making, but were part of a wider process which included public involvement as a key component. He further recognised that a sound scientific and technical basis was essential to building public confidence.

In Hans Issler’s view the three key questions were: the choice of waste management option; when to implement it and where to implement it. Any chosen system needed to be flexible and adapt to changes in society and technology and have political support throughout. He

recognised that society wanted reversibility and the importance of having pilot demonstration facilities had been suggested by an independent advisory committee. Such a facility could directly demonstrate the sealing of the final repository. Issler also referred to the Swiss decision-making process through referenda. Whilst this was slow, it was something which had to be respected and demonstrated the power of the community at both the local and Canton level. He also reflected Swiss society's view of the regulator, saying that an independent review of proposals had been requested by local people.

George Arens likened the German situation to that of "a battlefield" given the different views of the politicians, the nuclear industry and public opinion. There was a current moratorium on site investigation and a committee had been set up to look at site selection. He thought it crucial that the public be involved in the decision making process and that there should be explicit respect for public opinion.

John Greeves said that NRC had increased their spend on issues related to public involvement. They thought that public issues and science and technical work were integral to finding a solution and should not be viewed at cross purposes. He expressed the view that the roles of the players should be clear and that a strong regulatory process was needed as part of the overall decision-making process; this had to be shown to be independent, clear and understandable.

Alan Hooper noted the lessons learned in the UK that in order to achieve an acceptable outcome, the appropriate process, behaviour and structure must be established within a framework of transparency. He explained a Nirex commitment to give stakeholders access to and influence upon its work programme and the consequent preview of proposed work packages. He noted the special role of the waste management organisation in providing scientific and technical information in appropriate forms to provide a focus for involvement of all stakeholders, including the public. Nirex's current phased disposal concept was a direct outcome of the dialogue process. Thus a good balance was determined by the process of engagement rather than a predetermined allocation of resources.

On the question of site selection, raised by Hans Codée, Peter Nygårds echoed some of his earlier remarks stressing that volunteerism was essential to finding a solution. He added that in Sweden and Finland the industry was interested in environmental protection, the local community is very involved and they have good geology – all of which helped. Yves Le Bars was of the view that existing nuclear sites should be considered initially as they were most interested in finding a waste solution. George Arens said that timescales were an important aspect and that as decisions taken on the repository will impact future generations, who could not be consulted now, building in techniques for monitoring and retrievability would allow them to take some decisions in the future. However Yves Le Bars raised the question of how long options had to be kept open. He felt that the role of the geosphere is treated misleadingly in terms of a barrier, whereas it is its long-term stability that is of prim importance.

Participants from the audience were sceptical that geological disposal would ever get beyond a "holy war"; essentially the public does not like the concept and a decision would have to be imposed. The panel did not agree and felt that provided it is accepted that unanimous support is never achievable, an open, stepwise and systematic process that allows society to participate fully can deliver a sound and democratically-derived solution.

Mark Matthews wound up the session with a summary of the discussions and thanked the panel, the facilitators and the audience of over 100 for taking part.

John Mathieson, Co-chair

Mark Matthews, Co-chair.