

Importing Radioactive Waste to Russia – a deadly business

The battle to prevent Russia from becoming the world's nuclear waste dump is heating up. While a proposal has been tabled in the Russian parliament, the Duma, to overturn Russian Environmental Law that currently prohibits the importation of spent nuclear fuel for storage, environmental organisations are publicly campaigning for a national referendum on the import of radioactive materials to Russia.

Since the beginning of the commercial exploitation of nuclear power in the late 1950's, around 220,000t spent nuclear fuel (SNF), radioactive waste, has been produced around the world. SNF contains large quantities of the most dangerous radioactive substances on earth, as well as nuclear weapons usable plutonium. The global stockpile of SNF is growing at an alarming rate of over 10,000t per year. None of this SNF has yet been transferred to a final repository. Although intensive research has been undertaken in several countries none has yet established or operates such a facility and all are experiencing apparently insurmountable problems. The failure to find an acceptable solution for final SNF disposal is perhaps the nuclear industry's greatest failure.

In contrast to other governments the Russian government, represented by the Russian Ministry for Atomic Energy (Minatom), is actively promoting Russia as an international SNF storage and disposal country. However, like other countries, Russia doesn't have a final repository for SNF. Imported SNF would be first transported for interim storage to Mayak and/or Krasnoyarsk. Four candidate sites for a final repository are under investigation by Minatom:

- Deep disposal in granite at Zheleznogorsk/Krasnoyarsk;
- Deep disposal in porphyrite at Mayak/Southern Urals;
- Disposal in permafrost at Novaya Zemlya;
- Deep disposal in granite formations at Kola Peninsula.

At least two proposals have been put forward for SNF imports to Russia:

1. Minatom scheme (White Paper Valentin Ivanov)

In March this year, Greenpeace revealed a Minatom White Paper proposing an initial import of 20,500t SNF. Half of the expected revenue estimated at US\$21bn will be used for the SNF repository and management, the remainder, according to Minatom, will be profit. Potential customer countries identified in the Minatom Paper are:

Asia	Western Europe	Eastern Europe
Japan	Switzerland	Bulgaria
Taiwan	Spain	Hungary
South Korea	Germany	Czech Republic
China		Yugoslavia
Vietnam		
Iran		
Thailand		

The Minatom White Paper envisages nuclear reprocessing of the bulk of the imported SNF (16,000t out of the imported 20,500t). Reprocessing will only compound Russia's nuclear nightmare, as it leads to an increase in the volume of radioactive wastes requiring long term management, much of which is in a highly volatile liquid form. The reprocessing of one ton of spent fuel results in 45m³ of high level

waste, 150m³ of medium level waste and 2,000m³ of low level liquid waste. The process also generates a further 7,500kg of solid radioactive waste.

2. The Non Proliferation Trust Inc. (NPT)

Since 1998, the U.S. company the Non Proliferation Trust Inc (NPT) has been promoting the establishment of a commercial SNF storage facility in Russia. NPT advocates the import of 10,000t SNF. NPT are trying to sell this project in a number of ways. The \$15bn revenue would be split between: the construction of the repository; clean up of some of Russia's nuclear sites; nuclear non-proliferation activities; and social programs in Russia. According to NPT, the following countries have expressed interest in sending their SNF to Russia:

Asia	Western Europe	South America
South Korea	Switzerland	Mexico
Taiwan	Netherlands	

The NPT Board is made up of some very powerful and senior US nuclear figures:

General P.X. Kelley, former Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps; Dr William Von Raab, US Customs Commissioner during the Reagan era; Admiral Bruce DeMars, Chief Executive Officer of NPT, is former director of the Navy's nuclear propulsion program, chief of its nuclear submarine fleet and, until his recent retirement, head of its reactor program during the Clinton era; Admiral Daniel J. Murphy, Chairman of the Board of NPT, former commander of the Sixth Fleet, deputy director of the CIA and chief of staff for George Bush when he was vice-president. Murphy was also founder of the corporation U.S. Fuels & Security (USF&S), of which NPT is an offshoot.

Murphy and James Baker, former secretary of state under President Bush, as corporate counsel of USF&S, a few years ago promoted a scheme to dump up to 200,000 tons of radioactive waste on Wake Island, an atoll in the South Pacific which was subsequently abandoned after local and international opposition.

Other key roles for NPT are played William Webster, former director of both the CIA and the FBI, as well as Thomas Cochran, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Webster is the Chief Trustee of the Minatom Development Trust (MDT) owning 60% of NPT, while Cochran is Chief Trustee of the Russian Environmental Trust (RET) owning 30% of NPT. ¹ The German company Gesellschaft für Nuklear-Behälter mbH (GNB) has agreed to play a lead role in manufacturing casks similar to the CASTOR casks used for SNF transports in Germany.

The influential nature of the NPT Board is particularly worrying as the bulk of the SNF comes from countries originally supplied with nuclear fuel by the US, which maintains legally binding 'prior consent' rights over another further transports of the material to a third party.

Despite the claimed benefits of environmental clean up and social programmes, the detriments of bringing more radioactive waste into Russia will by far out weigh any claimed benefits. And, while NPT explicitly rule out any reprocessing of the imported SNF, it is likely that Minatom would use its revenues from this project to pursue its plans to expand reprocessing and fast breeder reactor programmes.

3. Campaign for a national referendum on SNF imports

¹ Jeffrey St. Clair is a contributing editor of In These Times, May 15th, 2000

While SNF imports are currently illegal under Russian law, since late 1998 Minatom has lobbied the Russian parliament, the Duma, and government to amend the Russian Law on Environmental Protection. Greenpeace and other Russian environmental organisations are currently collecting signatures calling for a nation-wide referendum on the import of SNF.

On September 29th, 26 days before the environmentalists have to hand over the collected signatures, the proposal to amend the Environmental Law was finally submitted to the Duma. In the coming weeks it will be considered by the Special Committee on Environment, the Finance Committee and the Industry Committee. Comments from all of these committees will then go before the full Duma in several months for debate and a vote.

Under the Russian Constitution, if an 'Initiative Group' collects 2 million signatures the President must call a national referendum. Since July 26th, eight environmental organisation -- Greenpeace Russia, World Wildlife Fund, Social-Ecological Union, Center for Wild Wildlife Protection, Ecological Guard of Sakhalin, Baikal Wave, Committee for the Rescue of the river Pechora, Ecological Center "Dront" - have collected over 2 million signatures. However, the groups plan to collect 2.5 million signatures, allowing for up to 20% of the signatures to be discounted on grounds of minor technicalities.

The text of the call for a referendum, which covers two other prominent environmental concerns, is:

"We, the underwriting, support the initiative to carry out a nation-wide referendum in the Russian Federation on these questions formulated as follows:

Question 1: Are you in favour of a ban for import of radioactive materials from other countries to the territory of Russia for storage, final disposal or reprocessing?

Question 2. Are you in favour of having in Russia a Federal State Authority for the protection of the environment, independent from authorities for use and distribution of natural resources?

Question 3. Are you in favour of having in Russia a legally independent State Forest Authority?"

Everybody who endorses the text must give their name, date of birth, home address and passport number.

The referendum signature collection is registered in 62 of Russia's 89 regions, only 200,000 signatures can be accepted from each region. The signatures have to be handed over to regional election committees in each region by October 25th.

The regional election committees will then have 15 days to count and check the signatures before handing them over to the central election committee in Moscow, which will spend a further 15 days checking the signatures. If the central committee confirms a total of over 2 million signatures then a referendum request is sent to the President. The President must either accept the call for the referendum and fix a date between 2 months and 4 months to hold it or reject the call in which case the constitutional court must be called on to arbitrate. The Court must rule within 30 days. If the ruling is positive it must set a referendum date between 2 months 4 months after its decision.

To be valid more than 50% of Russia's 90 million adult population must vote in the referendum and more than 50% must vote against the importation of radioactive waste. Should the Russian people reject the importation of radioactive waste the vote is legally binding with immediate effect, and the proposals to amend Russian environmental law would fail. (More information in Russian can be found under <http://www.zaprirodu.ru>.)

4. Why GREENPEACE is against international radioactive waste repositories

1. As there is no current solution for SNF final storage, countries operating nuclear power reactors should move as early as possible to a phase out of nuclear power. They should establish national,

monitored, above ground dry stores, instead of irresponsibly dumping their nuclear waste on a poor country with a disastrous record for storing nuclear waste.

2. As proposed in the Minatom White Paper, as well as its nuclear strategy, the idea behind SNF imports to Russia is to finance new reprocessing facilities and fast breeder reactors. Russia wants the money to pursue the out-dated 'cold war' concept of a plutonium economy. While the NPT scheme excludes reprocessing of imported SNF, it is most unlikely that Russia would not use revenue from the SNF import for its reprocessing/fast breeder programme.
3. Even if of the income from SNF import and disposal \$7.2 billion for “regional social-economic and ecological problems” (Minatom document) or \$3 billion for “clean-up” (NPT proposal) was actually used for environmental remediation, the damage done to the Russian environment by final disposal and reprocessing of thousands of tons SNF would by far outweigh any benefits.

For more information:

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