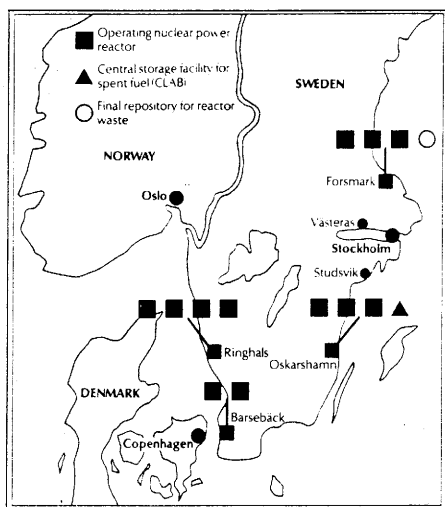


Nirex notes

The UKAEA are to appeal against the Highland Regional Council's refusal to allow test drilling at Dounreay, to assess the rock's suitability for a national nuclear waste repository. Councillors on the Region's Planning Committee voted 16 to 5 to throw out the application.

This follows a similar application for test bores at Sellafield which was opposed by Cumbria County Council, but, former Environment Secretary, Nicholas Ridley overruled their decision on appeal and test bores are now being sunk.

The five councillors who voted against the refusal wanted to defer a decision until they had visited the Forsmark nuclear waste dump in



Sweden. One councillor put forward a motion to approve the test bores, but failed to find a seconder.

In the run-up to the Caithness referendum on the nuclear waste issue, due to take place in October, more and more significance is being attached to the methods of disposal used in other countries. Douglas McRoberts, Head of Information Services at Dounreay, writing in the John O'Groat Journal, a Caithness local paper, reviewed nuclear waste disposal methods in other parts of the world.

To illustrate the potential success of nuclear waste disposal, McRoberts made the unfortunate choice of the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) in New Mexico. The information he gave on WIPP was described in a letter to the 'Groat' by Jean Fazzino of the US Radioactive Waste Campaign as "an outright lie".

McRoberts claimed that WIPP "is already receiving shipments" and the repository "is dry, and has remained stable for over 225 million years." Fazzino points out that WIPP is not opened. Construction work on the dump began in 1981, and it should have opened in July this year. It remains unopened because in 1987

scientists from the University of New Mexico discovered brine, salt-laden water, seeping into the underground repository. They believe the brine could turn the radioactive waste into a pressurised slurry of radioactive and toxic waste. It is for this reason that it has been dubbed the 'champagne' nuclear dump. If ever it was punctured, radioactive brine would spurt to the surface like uncorked bubbly.

Cracks have also been recently discovered in WIPP's storage room ceilings and floors. Critics of the scheme are concerned that brine contaminated with plutonium could make its way into the nearby Pecos River and "destroy agriculture, urban drinking water and ocean fishing resources for thousands of years."

McRoberts contends that "Transportation [to WIPP] is impressive. It's almost all done by trucks, which are constantly tracked and monitored by two separate satellite systems - one for voice communications and the other for automatic tracking." Fazzino argues that "even before the waste can be shipped, a suitable container must be found. Approximately \$25m has been spent designing and building TRUPACT 2 (transuranic packaging transporter). It has failed impact tests even after three series of redesigning and testing, and has not been approved by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission."

Concern over transportation and potential leaks has led to the state of Texas and a coalition of environmental groups threatening legal action to stop WIPP opening unless the Department of Energy can prove it is able to isolate radioactive wastes from the environment.

Lastly, McRoberts contends that "local (New Mexico) liaisons are good." State Senator Rutherford told the local press "We have waste we aren't sure about, stored in containers that haven't been approved, travelling over roads that haven't been improved and being put in salt beds we don't know about. We'd like to put the brakes on before we get to the edge of the cliff."

Nirex flew around 30 local business and community representatives, including Caithness District councillors to Forsmark in Sweden at the end of May. McRoberts said "There are many parallels between the permanent deep repository at Forsmark and Dounreay. This visit will give people a good idea of one in action." However, delegates were warned by Shetland-based Northern European Nuclear Information Group that the facility is an excellent example of how not to dispose of radioactive waste.

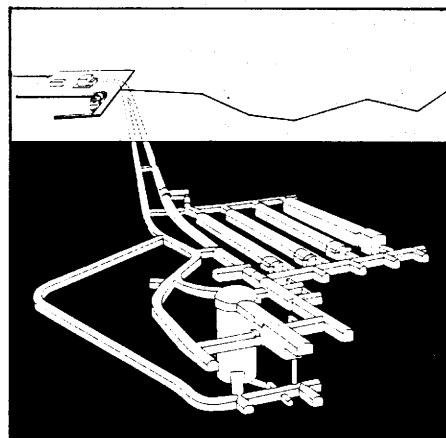
The Forsmark repository, SFR-1, was constructed 50 metres under the seabed, and is accessed from

the land. Stage 1 is complete and consists of the surface storage buildings, a tunnel system, and storage space for 60,000 cu.m. of waste. Stage 2 will bring the total storage capacity to 90,000 cu.m. In contrast a UK repository will be 200 to 1,000 metres deep, but it will be designed to dispose of 2 million cu.m. It will therefore be over 20 times the size of Forsmark.

Forsmark is not intended to permanently contain the radioactive waste, but only to act as a barrier to slow down leakage and eventual dilution in the sea. It is accepted that it will fill with water after a few years and that radioactivity will eventually leak into the Baltic Sea. It is in fact simply a form of delayed sea dumping.

SFR-1 is intended to be the final storage area for all the operational low- and medium-level waste from Sweden's 12 nuclear reactors. But unlike a UK repository it will not take long-lived intermediate-level waste. The Swedes have decided to phase out nuclear power, so it's easy to estimate accurately the of waste to be deposited at Forsmark, and they know it will close in 2010. In the UK we don't have that luxury, and after the first repository has completed its 50 year life, another one could be built next to it.

As in the UK, site selection in Sweden seems to be based more on political expediency than geology or the long-term integrity of the facility. The local Municipality voted in favour of the dump, but if



Phase 1 Development of the SFR

they hadn't they could have vetoed it. If Dounreay were in Sweden the Highland Region's vote could have simply stopped the proposals.

However, Highland Region and Caithness District are not going to be the soft touch Nirex might have expected. Many people are angry that the Government seem to be working to a hidden agenda and have already made their mind up. Councillor Michael Foxley echoes their feelings, about Nirex, when he declares "You wouldn't even trust them to bury your dog."