



Vice-President Cheney Wrong About French Nuclear Repository Program

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PRESS RELEASE

Vice-President Cheney Wrong About French Nuclear Repository Program, Independent Institute Asserts

French Public's Opposition to Nuclear Waste Repositories as Deep as that in the United States

Washington, D.C.: Vice-President Cheney's claim that France has a safe and environmentally sound repository for burying radioactive waste generated by nuclear power plants is wrong, according to the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER), an independent non-profit group that has published numerous technical reports, books, and papers on nuclear waste management and related issues.

In a May 8 interview with CNN on the Bush administration's proposed energy policy, the Vice-President said: "Right now we've got waste piling up at reactors all over the country. Eventually, there ought to be a permanent repository. The French do this very successfully and very safely in an environmentally sound, sane manner. We need to be able to do the same thing."

"The facts regarding the French repository program contradict Vice-President Cheney," said Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of IEER, who has written widely on nuclear waste issues. "France has no repository, and their siting program faces huge domestic opposition. The controversy that surrounds waste management is a thorn in the side of the French nuclear industry."

The French government's schedule for a repository, like the U.S. schedule, is far too rapid for a careful scientific investigation required for estimating repository performance over hundreds of thousands of years, according to IEER. Later this year, the U.S. government hopes to declare the proposed Yucca Mountain repository site in Nevada suitable for disposing of radioactive waste, despite serious unresolved questions. The earliest U.S. government projection for opening the proposed repository is 2010. The earliest government-projected French repository opening date is 2015. Both programs have faced intense opposition.

The first opposition in France surfaced in 1987 when the French government opened the search for a repository site without a significant public process. The opposition from the local populations was so intense that government investigators were not allowed near some of the named sites. Many protests centered around concern for the safety and image of France's food supply. France created a new waste law in 1991.



Like the 1982 U.S. Nuclear Waste Policy Act, the 1991 French law mandates that there should be two sites (called laboratories in France) for study. In 1998, a clay site, Bure, located in the east of France was chosen for study, over local objections. The site is in an economically depressed area, and was chosen in disregard of both local opposition (which continues) and a large body of emerging evidence that, contrary to decades-old assumptions, plutonium and several other radionuclides migrate rapidly towards the groundwater under a variety of geologic circumstances.

“When I spoke with the officials at the Bure site,” noted Dr. Makhijani, who toured the site in July 2000 at the instance of community leaders and local government officials, “they seemed quite unaware of recent U.S. research on the migration of plutonium, for instance in colloidal form. Ignoring important scientific issues in France is quite parallel to what the U.S. Department of Energy has done with the U.S. repository program.”

The areas where a second site may be selected for research were listed early last year. The opposition was intense and widespread – in one case, large numbers of people escorted the officials’ car to the border of the Mayenne Département. (A Département is a French administrative unit in between a county and a state.) The people wanted to see an end to the production of waste and pointed out that it was not very democratic to discuss dumping waste in areas that had had no say in the decision to produce it.

“France made a historic mistake when it decided to rely so heavily on nuclear power, rather than develop more advanced renewable technologies and efficient utilization methods,” said Didier Anger, a local elected official, and a founder of France’s Green Party, which is part of the ruling coalition government. Mr. Anger represents one of France’s most heavily nuclearized regions, Normandy, where the world’s largest commercial plutonium separation plant is located.

France’s nuclear waste management differs from the U.S. in one major respect. France has a major plant, called a reprocessing plant, to dissolve used reactor fuel in a chemical plant to separate plutonium, uranium and fission products.

“But reprocessing does not get rid of the radioactivity,” said Dr. Makhijani. “Rather it creates more pollution. Moreover the separated plutonium is a proliferation problem and a very costly, uneconomical fuel.”

Liquid waste discharges from reprocessing are polluting the English Channel and spreading radioactivity in the seas of Western Europe. The pollution from the reprocessing plant has so rankled other European countries, that 12 members of the OSPAR (Oslo-Paris) convention (a European body whose mission is to protect the marine environment) voted last year for the elimination of the radioactive releases from the plant with a view to shutting down the reprocessing activity. France abstained. Denmark, Norway and Ireland have called on France and Britain, which runs a similar plant, to shut down their reprocessing operations.

The French public is also growing more and more skeptical of government claims about the safety of nuclear power. Government spokespersons misled the French public into believing that there was no fallout on France after the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986, even as the rest of Europe was dumping contaminated food. Those reassurances have since been proven to be false. France, like much of the rest of Europe has hot spots from Chernobyl. The government has recently commissioned an epidemiological



study to investigate the role of the Chernobyl accident in the increase of thyroid cancers.

“There is no good solution to the problem of long-lived nuclear waste,” said Dr. Makhijani. “Before we launch into an energy policy that will lock us into another generation of waste creation, we ought at least to look carefully at the terrible burdens we will pass on to future generations from the last round of reactors.”

“France is no showcase for nuclear power,” said Didier Anger. “Before pointing to France as a success story, the American public should ask the French people what they think of the problems of waste, disease, and government cover-ups.”