

PRESS RELEASE

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Government proposal on nuclear waste disposal is a victory for the environment

On Thursday, October 12th, the Danish government's proposal for future nuclear waste management was presented in the Ministry of Higher Education and Science's contact forum for nuclear waste. The proposal indicates that the low and intermediate level radioactive waste will be temporarily stored for the next 30-50 years at Risø National Laboratory and then permanently disposed of in a deep geological repository. This means that the previous final repository localisation process has to be repeated from scratch. Furthermore, the option of transnational cooperation is kept open [1]. The government deserves praise for taking seriously criticism from citizens groups, green NGOs, international experts and nuclear authorities in neighbouring countries. The only thing missing in the government proposal is a nuclear waste fund.

After being side-tracked for more than a decade, the Danish nuclear process is heading in the right direction. The process has been riddled with problems and criticised heavily by local government, green NGOs, citizens groups, independent international expert organisations and nuclear authorities in other countries. The criticism has focused on the decision-making process – lack of transparency and public participation – and deficiencies in the documentation presented to the public, classification of the nuclear waste and choice of repository types [2].

"The government has made the right decision by temporarily storing the waste at Risø in facilities that will be more safe than the current", says Hans Pedersen from SustainableEnergy. "This is the place where most of the waste has been generated and there are no rational arguments for moving it before it is finally disposed of".

"The criticism from independent experts and nuclear authorities in neighbouring countries is nothing new", says Palle Bendsen from NOAH Friends of the Earth Denmark's uranium group. "The perception there is that the originally planned near-surface or medium deep final repository is not safe and does not meet international safety standards. By listening to the criticism, the government has demonstrated that it takes safety issues seriously and has no intention of compromising public health or the environment".

Improvement in the decision-making is not least due to the fact that the nuclear waste process is now significantly better. After the Ministry of Higher Education and Science established a contact forum in 2016 with participation of the organisations and authorities responsible for the management and disposal of the radioactive waste from Risø, and regional authorities, green NGOs and citizens groups, the dialogue with civil society has been much more constructive [3]. An expert group appointed by the Danish Council for Independent Research is affiliated with the contact group and Danish Decommissioning has founded an international evaluation group, which follows and comments on the nuclear waste process. In view of the positive results, it is crucial that the contact forum continues and comprises as many stakeholders as possible.

"The only thing missing in the government proposal is a nuclear waste fund similar to the ones found in many of the countries that we normally compare ourselves to", says Niels Henrik Hooge from NOAH Friends of The Earth Denmark's uranium group. "The fund must assure that future generations are not unfairly burdened as a consequence of the intermediary storage postponing the final disposal of the waste.

Sufficient money, earmarked for the construction and possibly the operation of the final repository, must be transferred to the fund to guarantee that the financing of the repository is in place at the time it was originally planned to be in operation". [4]

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Notes:

[1] Press release from the Ministry for Higher Education and Science: Long-term disposal of nuclear waste requires more time, 19 September 2017 (Danish language): kortlink.dk/ufm/rmq2

[2] Johan Swahn, Gerhard Schmidt, Palle Bendsen and Hans Pedersen: The Danish nuclear waste management process must be improved, Feature article in Ingeniøren, 30 October 2015 (English unabbreviated version): <https://noah.dk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Feature-article-contact-forum-Rad-Waste.pdf>

[3] Website, Ministry of Higher Education and Science: kortlink.dk/ufm/rms2

[4] NOAH FoE Denmark: Ethical reflections on the distribution of burdens between current and future generations in regard to the construction of an interim storage facility for low and intermediate radioactive waste, Presentation in the Ministry of Higher Education and Science's contact forum for nuclear waste, 14 December 2016 (Danish language): kortlink.dk/ufm/rmpz