

NEWS RELEASE

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Finland Leads the Way with Plan for Nuclear Repository

Brussels, 21 December 2000: The Finnish government decision favouring development of a deep underground repository for spent nuclear fuel is a morally responsible move that deserves the highest praise, according to FORATOM, the trade association for the nuclear industry in Europe.

Following the government go-ahead, which is subject to ratification by parliament, Finland is set to become the first country in the world to build a final repository for spent fuel from nuclear power plants. Sweden and the US are also well ahead with similar plans.

FORATOM argues that the time has now come for other countries to seriously address this important issue and press ahead with projects that will isolate this material from the biosphere.

Commenting on the Finnish decision, FORATOM's Secretary General, Dr. Wolf-J. Schmidt-Küster, said: "This demolishes the old argument of the anti-nuclear lobby that 'no-one knows what to do with radioactive waste and spent nuclear fuel'. Such distorted assertions can now be safely disposed of.

"The truth is that the safe management of radioactive waste has been ongoing since the start of the nuclear industrial era. Low- and medium-level radioactive waste is managed safely in a way that poses no threat to public health or the environment."

The only outstanding issue is the final storage of spent nuclear fuel and the small amount of high-level waste left over from spent fuel reprocessing. No great urgency has been attached to this, because suitable interim storage facilities are in place. The technology for deep underground repositories, involving multiple natural and engineered barriers, is also in place, along with the funding required for the repositories to be built. The funding is accumulated through the sale of nuclear electricity.

"The only thing that has been lacking so far," said Dr. Schmidt-Küster, "is the political will to press ahead with the construction of deep underground repositories. The Finnish government deserves the highest praise for recognising that this is an issue that now requires definite action.

"Over the past four decades, the present generation has derived enormous benefits from the application of nuclear technology in a variety of fields – power generation and medicine, in particular. It is unacceptable for the spent fuel and waste involved to be left for the next generation to take care of.

"Finland is facing up to this moral responsibility. It is now time for other countries to do the same and turn their good intentions into concrete actions."

The need to find a satisfactory solution to the nuclear waste issue was stressed in the Green Paper on security of energy supply, published recently by the European Commission. The discussion document said that the stability required for the development of nuclear power was dependent on the waste issue being resolved.

The Finnish parliament will now consider the government's 'decision in principle' in favour of a repository, and a parliamentary decision is expected in March. If parliament approves the plan, further decision-making will be necessary to licence the actual construction work.

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