

## **CZECH SEARCH FOR NUCLEAR WASTE REPOSITORY**

**During the last two years there has been relatively rapid development in the search for a final deep geological repository for nuclear wastes in the Czech Republic. After years of general confusion following the break-up of the former Soviet Union and consequent loss, for the Czech republic (and other CEE states), of the option to export nuclear wastes back to Russia (for re-fabrication or storage), the newly established state offices now self-confidently claim the ability to solve the waste problem.**

**WISE Czech Republic** - On the basis of the so-called “atomic law” approved in 1997, the Radioactive Wastes Repository Authority (SURAO) was entrusted with the task of managing all nuclear wastes in the Czech Republic. Intermediate and long-term wastes, most in the form of spent fuel from the two Czech NPPs, Dukovany and Temelin, form the substantial part of all the wastes. Currently these wastes are stockpiled onsite in a surface storage facility at Dukovany NPP but as with other nuclear countries, no solution for intermediate and long-term management has been found. *The Concept of Radioactive Waste and Spent Fuel Management in the Czech Republic*, approved by the government in May 2002, proposed a deep geological depositing as the preferred long-term management option.

### **Site selection**

SURAO began research activities for the siting of a deep geological repository (DGR) in the Czech Republic in 1998 and after several months of studying archival geological data, came up with a list of eight potentially suitable localities.

In April 2003 SURAO announced another “narrowing” of the list of selected areas. The term was misleading because although two areas were ruled out (probably as a result of the close proximity to the border of strongly anti-nuclear Austria, already in dispute with the Czech Republic over the completion of Temelin NPP), two new areas were also added. In order to create the impression of development in the research work and to justify the use of the term “narrowing”, SURAO, in two cases, united pairs of localities previously considered separate (but situated in the same vicinity) into one single locality. The list was thereby officially reduced to six “main” localities in April 2003 and moreover, SURAO published a list of “substitute” localities. These five places would not be subject to further geological research immediately but would be the preferred areas to begin new research if none of the current six main localities prove suitable.

The first phase of research activities (1998-2003) culminated in a study carried out by a sub-contracting company Energoprůzkum Praha (EpP). EpP geologists concluded their research works by presenting two lists of prospect localities - a “broad version” (8 sites + 1 “artificial” locality situated in former coalmines) and a “narrow version” (6+1). SURAO, however, only took part of EpP’s conclusions into consideration and decided on the choice of 6 localities - all situated in granitic rock formations. The rest became “substitutes” while the artificial locality was ruled out completely.

EpP and SURAO have subsequently argued about their different choices, clearly illustrating a lack of agreement among expert geologists even on the basic steps - choice of localities to be researched.

### **Public opposition**

SURAO immediately began the next phase of research, field geological surveys, once the six localities were announced.

At the same time, citizens living around all six localities began to seriously turn their attention to the

issue, developing active opposition towards the project with unprecedented intensity. The progress of events was similar in all areas - starting with petitions and joint letters of opposition sent to SURAO and other state institutions by the mayors of most villages (one locality covers area of 8 villages on average). The letters usually included lists of environmental and social arguments against siting of the DGR in the region but also criticizing the lack of transparency (citizens and mayors were only informed ex-post and by the media about their inclusion in SURAO's list) and lack of democratic procedures in the decision-making.

The villages began seeking legal methods to enable their participation in decision making after receiving little or no reaction from the state politicians and officials to their letters and petitions. Unfortunately they discovered that their position and prospects were weak. Current Czech Atomic law explicitly stipulates the investor (applicant) of a nuclear facility as the only participant in the licensing procedures. Villages are allowed to give their comments during previous procedures (land-use permit, territorial, building-license, EIA) but these are not binding. State offices can easily overrule any opposition from the villages.

Some citizens and village representatives initiated local referenda (15 by 28 April), results of which are binding for the villages and their elected bodies, but not for state offices. 80-100% of voters opposed the siting of DGR in or around their village with a very high average number of participating constituency - about 70% (unusual in the post-communist countries).

Some areas, realizing the limits of the practical powers of referenda in the current Czech legal system, have found other methods to express disapproval. 6 cities (including Jihlava, the region's seat) and 36 villages situated around Rohozna locality have composed a joint letter describing in detail the arguments against placing DGR in the Rohozna area. Representatives of another locality, Pacejov, began a new petition demanding, among other things, the halt of all research activities and re-assessment of the current national concept on radioactive waste management. The petition was signed by elected boards of over 120 Czech municipalities, mostly situated around prospective DGR areas. A Local citizen association (NGO) in Pacejov, formed with the aim of preventing DGR siting in the locality, has assembled over 4,000 members just a few months after its foundation although the entire area houses just over 10,000.

The protests have grown from local to regional. The six localities are scattered in the area of four regions ("lands"). During January and February, elected boards of three of these regions adopted resolutions refusing the siting of DGR to the localities in their area. The fourth regional board is yet to follow but judging by the latest media statements of its high officials it is just a matter of time.

### **Tactical maneuvering**

Late in 2003 the problem outgrew national limits. The Ministry of Industry and Trade (MIT) was preparing a new national energy policy which included a proposal for construction of two more nuclear reactors (*see WISE/NIRS Nuclear Monitor 607.5594 "Czech Government Adopts National Energy Policy"*). Lack of a prospective solution or even any policy on nuclear waste management could have made it difficult for MIT to push ahead with new reactors therefore MIT has ordered SURAO to change tactics in dealing with the opposition from the villages.

In December SURAO sent a letter to all villages in which the elected boards were officially asked about their willingness to co-operate with research activities. Those villages that would not stand against co-operation were promised the opportunity to become the subject of an "accompanying development program" - in other words, they were promised money. Villages unwilling to co-operate were granted a halt on all research activities in their area - but only for 5 years. One of 48 villages has

allegedly reacted positively to the offer but any talks are kept secret as both SURAO and the village's representatives are afraid of public outcry from the opponents both from inside the village and from neighboring villages.

In mid February the Minister of Industry, Milan Urban, publicly announced the "halt of all research activities concerning the DGR in the Czech Republic". As an alternative option, he mentioned efforts to find a common solution on the EU level. Nevertheless his announcement was probably a tactical step in order to temporarily calm down the rising opposition towards his energy policy proposal and towards the research policy of SURAO.

Later events would show this suspicion to be true. The MIT energy policy proposal was approved in mid March and since then information on future research concerning DGR has become more opaque – information from various state offices (MIT, SURAO) is even more confusing and contradictory. The latest news suggests that SURAO, well aware of current deadlock situation in the regions, plans to suspend field geological research but continue other research and PR activities. It intends to pass the responsibility to the government and has drafted a proposal (suggesting the halt of research and reassessment of current policy) and submitted it to the MIT and the government. The government is now under pressure from both sides - on the one hand it favors the operation of the six current reactors and even adopted an energy strategy that incorporates additional nuclear capacity (after 2020), while on the other hand it is faced with heavy local and regional opposition concerning the wastes.

In the meantime the nuclear lobby has successfully dismissed a proposal for the amendment of the atomic law. Originally drafted by senator Jitka Seitlova in co-operation with several NGOs, the amendment would give the municipalities right to joint decision making in the siting processes of nuclear facilities, increase the ceiling of financial liability for potential nuclear damages and guarantee the municipalities around nuclear facilities financial compensation for the economic losses resulting from their close vicinity. The proposal was stopped at the beginning of legislative process (in the Senate) but in the end its proponents at least succeeded in convince their colleague-Senators not to sweep it off the table completely. The proposal has been frozen for one year until which time "implications of its contents can be considered in more detail by experts" and also "the EU is expected to decide on its policy towards management of nuclear waste in its member states".

The Czech Republic officially entering the EU on 1 May but it remains to be seen whether this historical moment will be of any help in the search for long-term solution of dealing its nuclear wastes.

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