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'IT IS IRRESPONSIBLE TO VOTE FOR THIS IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT CUMBRIA IS HEAVILY UNSUITABLE'

by Mark Green

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The Government's process for selecting a possible underground repository for nuclear waste is wrong, the idea of basing it in Cumbria is flawed and if it goes ahead it will result in costly failure.

The response to this article is here: 'Geologists say further investigation is justified'

The damning verdict comes from professor David Smythe, Emeritus Professor of Geophysics at the University of Glasgow, a retired academic and former member of the British Geological Survey.

"I am not against geological disposal in principle. But we cannot permit the Government's essentially underhand strategy to override the fact that west Cumbria is, by any objective scientific standards, completely unsuitable," he says.

Prof Smythe gave his views and evidence to Cumbria's MPs who met earlier this month to discuss controversial plans to site the dump in west Cumbria.

He claims that the findings of an initial country-wide survey to identify a suitable site for a nuclear dump have been ignored and a previous "abortive attempt" to find a suitable site in west Cumbria has been "airbrushed" from history.

The professor says the most suitable sites can be found hundreds of miles away – in Lincolnshire and Norfolk.

Instead of pushing ahead with the current plans, Sellafield bosses should introduce an interim surface storage solution to last 100 years while a thorough, honest and transparent countrywide search for a site is undertaken.

Prof Smythe, who now lives in southern France, believes the whole issue has been pre-determined by the Government and the voluntary issue has been created to justify their decision.

He says he has no axe to grind in respect of the nuclear industry or west Cumbria and insists that his research has been done at his own instigation and not at the request of any pressure group.

He told The Cumberland News: "No one has asked me to do this, I do it out of a sense of injustice and the feeling that the findings of the 1997 planning inquiry has been ignored."

He says that basing the repository near a functioning reprocessing site is not a valid argument as waste from nuclear facilities elsewhere in the UK would be transported there.

"The French have just agreed to base a repository in the Champagne region and that is nowhere near a nuclear site," he says.

"If it can be done in other civilised countries, how come the Brits can't do it? It is a political failure and they have ducked the challenge.

"Most geologists now agree that a nice thick clay layer is preferable to crystalline rock, which is what Cumbria has.

"Deposits of Oxford clay, London clay and gault clay can be found in the east of England, from Yorkshire down through the midlands to Dorset."

Prof Smythe says there are "plenty of areas" in Lincolnshire and Norfolk well away from main areas of population which would be more suitable for a nuclear dump than Cumbria.

"I would not care about planning permissions for wind turbines or oilfields because they only affect our generation.

"A nuclear waste repository is forever. It is there for 100,000 years and we have to get it right geologically.



David Smythe

"It is irresponsible to vote for it, whether you are a national or a local politician, in the knowledge that it is geologically heavily unsuitable.

"I'm pessimistic that the councillors will say 'no'. Then I don't know what will happen, though the Government will have a fight on its hands."

Professor Smythe is a highly respected expert in his field. As part of the evidence he gave to the MPs he stated: "The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA, the successor to Nirex) has airbrushed out the history of the previous abortive attempt to find a nuclear waste repository in west Cumbria.

"This attempt culminated in the 1995-96 Sellafield Public Planning Inquiry. Documents and scientific papers which were formerly available on official websites have been removed; the Nirex documents have been transferred to the safe keeping of the British Geological Survey (BGS), where they may be 'consulted' at Keyworth, Nottinghamshire.

"I have further analysed in detail the Nirex site selection process (some 537 UK sites were identified in 1988), leading to the choice of Sellafield.

"To cut a long story short, both 'Sellafield' sites should have been eliminated early on in the sieving process, and one of the finalists, Stanford, Norfolk, should have been declared the best site on the criteria employed at that time.

"The Government's strategy to overcome its failure to find a safe disposal site is as follows:

- Wait 15 years, commissioning no substantive new research.
- Remove the right to future planning inquiries.
- Find a 'volunteer community' (eg west Cumbria)
- Remove evidence of the planning inquiry where possible.
- Present the inquiry failure as a local technical difficulty at one particular locality (Longlands Farm).
- Ignore the detailed national search carried out by the British Geological Survey in the 1980s.
- Pretend that we don't yet know enough about the area, geologically, to rule it out.
- Ignore international guidelines and practice on repository safety.
- Wrongly claim that other countries have solved the siting problem by volunteerism, and ignoring the geology.
- Spend £1m per annum on PR in West Cumbria.
- Buy off local councils with bribes ('community benefit packages').

"The British Geological Survey (BGS) was employed in 2010 to prepare its Initial Geology Unsuitability Screening of West Cumbria. Its remit was tightly constrained, to give the misleading impression that some parts of west Cumbria are to be considered suitable for nuclear waste disposal – after further site investigations, of course.

"At no point will the BGS be permitted to conclude that no part of west Cumbria is suitable, despite the fact that it came to that conclusion in the late 1980s.

"So, as a former BGS geophysicist myself, I am saying it for them."

In conclusion, Prof Smythe states: "The Managing Radioactive Waste Safely Partnership process should not go to Stage 4 as there is ample evidence that public money will be wasted and time will be lost.

"Political pressures will mean that a geologically poor site will be chosen, but shored up by nuclear waste civil engineers who will assert that they can solve the insoluble and that their grouting and filling will be good for 100,000 years."

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