

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



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Windscale/Sellafield Nuclear Reprocessing Plant Discharges

1. Discharges

Low level radioactive liquid effluents are discharged from the Windscale plant in accordance with authorisations issued by the U.K. Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of the Environment. The amounts discharged reached their maximum level about 1974/75 due to operational difficulties at the plant but have been reduced in recent years. The effluents include caesium, which the Irish Nuclear Energy Board has stated to be of principal interest to Ireland from a public health point of view, and plutonium.

2. New Effluent Treatment System

There is expected to be a reduction in the level of radioactivity discharged when a new effluent treatment system currently under construction comes into operation in 1984. The Environmental Group, Greenpeace, has contended that these improvements will not go far enough, and that the technology is available to properly control discharges.

3. Public Enquiries

The Nuclear Energy Board has stated that the UK authorities intend to review their discharge authorisations before the new treatment plant comes into operation. A public enquiry is expected to be held shortly.

Following the Yorkshire Television programme on Windscale the U.K. Secretary of State for the Environment, Mr Jenkin, has told the Commons that there would be an investigation into the levels of cancer among people living close to the plant.

4. Nuclear Energy Board Monitoring of the Irish Sea

The Board conducts a monitoring programme which is designed to provide information on the distribution of radioactivity in the Irish Sea and to enable estimates to be made of the radiation exposure of the public. Detailed results of this monitoring are contained in the Boards report at Appendix 2 . The level of radioactivity in the vicinity of the Windscale plant has been found to be considerably higher than that found closer to our coast. It has been established that the Irish population is most at risk to radiation exposure through the consumption of fish. The Board has concluded that the exposure from this source is less than 1% of the limit recommended by the International Commission on Radiological Protection and consequently does not constitute a health risk of any significance.

5. Reasons for Concern about Discharges

- The proximity of the Windscale plant to our shores.
- The level of radioactivity in discharges from Windscale is higher than that found in discharges from the French nuclear reprocessing plant at Cap de la Hague.
- There is no conclusive scientific evidence which will allay fears as to possible cumulative effects of radionuclides in the aquatic environment.
- Possible long term adverse effects on our fishing industry, population and amenity value of our coastal waters.
- Only the European Atomic Energy Community has made precise recommendations applicable to discharges of radioactive substances to the marine environment. (More extensive studies and requirements have been made in the case of the dumping of radioactive wastes at sea but these are not fully applicable to operations such as Windscale).

- The need for further scientific investigation into these discharges is reflected in the questions which the Paris Commission (Convention for the Prevention of Marine Pollution from Land Based Sources) has put to the Nuclear Energy Agency. Aspects queried include the need to have provisions for plutonium in authorisations for discharges and possible cumulative effects of radioactive substances in the sea, leading to risks to Man and marine organisms which annual authorisation limits would be unable to eliminate.

6. Ireland's Position on Radioactive Discharges Generally

- Discharges should be subject to the best available technology.
- Further scientific investigations should be carried out to determine (i) the basis on which discharges could continue without threat to Man or the marine environment or (ii) whether they should cease entirely and other methods found for the disposal of such wastes. (Ireland called on the Paris Commission to initiate such studies at a meeting held in Berlin in June, 1983).
- The Paris Convention for the Prevention of Marine Pollution from Land Based Sources, which contains provisions on radioactive discharges to the marine environment, provides an ideal forum in which to pursue adequate internationally applicable controls on these discharges to the North East Atlantic and the Irish Sea. We are continuing our efforts to secure such controls in this context.

7. Contacts with Britain on Nuclear Matters

ANGLO/IRISH EXCHANGE AGREEMENT

The Department of Foreign Affairs is in contact with the British authorities about the conclusion of an Anglo/Irish Exchange Agreement on Nuclear Matters. The proposal for an Agreement was initiated by the Department of Industry and Energy with a view to securing the exchange of information on a wide range of nuclear matters, including accidents at nuclear plants, routes of vessels transporting nuclear materials, and possible arrangements for the provision of assistance by the British authorities in the event of an accident at a U.K. nuclear plant resulting in the Irish population being exposed to fallout.

PROVISION APPLICABLE TO WINDSCALE

The negotiations to conclude the Agreement are at a preliminary stage. The Department of Foreign Affairs has been requested (by this Department) to enter negotiations on a further provision in the proposed Agreement which would require both States to have regard to the best available technology when issuing authorisations for radioactive discharges to the aquatic environment.

8. Areas in which the Co-operation of the U.K. Prime Minister should be sought

- (a) Her support in concluding the Anglo/Irish Exchange Agreement on Nuclear Matters (see 7 above), particularly the provision in regard to the taking account of the best available technology when issuing authorisations for radioactive discharges from Windscale.
- (b) That account be taken of our concern about Windscale discharges when authorisations are reviewed.

- (c) Her support for a European Commission proposal for a study of the impact on the Community of radioactivity in the marine environment.
- (d) Her support within the Paris Commission in securing more precise controls on radioactive discharges.