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A Common Approach to the Nuclear Waste Issue

IAEA Workshop Looks at Regulatory Needs for Waste Disposal Solutions

Staff Report

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Cape Town, South Africa | Whether of the extremely radioactive high-level, long-lived kind or the short-lived, low-level type, the issue of nuclear waste and methods of its disposal remain one of the most pressing problems facing the nuclear sector.

"Technical solutions for waste disposal do exist and they are certainly safe," explains Didier Louvat, who heads the IAEA's Waste and Environmental Safety Section.

"However, what has been missing so far is a uniform, international approach to this issue at a normative level."

In particular, as a number of countries are moving towards the licensing of geological disposal facilities, the potential benefit of having an internationally harmonized approach to the safety demonstration and licensing process is clearly emerging.

As part of its effort to tackle this issue, the IAEA held this week in Cape Town, South Africa, an international workshop on the safety and licensing of radioactive waste disposal. More than 90 international experts participated in the one-day event.

The workshop follows on the heels of the development of a revised and consolidated international Safety Requirements standard for radioactive waste disposal compiled by the IAEA.

"With this workshop we intended to create awareness of the developments taking place in the international safety standards for radioactive waste disposal, and the work aimed at the harmonization of the of approaches to demonstrating the safety of geological disposal," says the IAEA's Louvat.

"We also wanted to identify the related implications for the licensing process."

According to the IAEA's Phil Metcalf, who heads the Radioactive Waste and Spent Fuel Management Unit, participants had the opportunity to hear the fact that geological disposal is a doable solution, although one that requires considerable effort on the part of operators developing safety arguments and evidence, and the regulatory authority who have to evaluate them.


"But above all, the message was that plans for disposing of radioactive waste need to be done as soon as a decision to go nuclear is taken," he says.



More than 90 international experts participated in the one-day workshop in which aspects and approaches to the licensing of radioactive waste disposal were discussed. (Photo: P. Metcalf/IAEA)

Story Resources

- [Conference Information, IAEA Department of Nuclear Safety and Security](#)
- [IAEA Conference to Discuss Nuclear Regulatory Systems, Media Advisory, 8 December 2009](#)
- [IAEA Department of Nuclear Safety and Security](#)
- [South African National Nuclear Regulator \(NNR\)](#)

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The workshop also explored the benefits of cooperating with the mining industry for information exchange on the issue of conventional mining safety in respect of geological disposal facilities in particular, and radioactive waste disposal in general.

Background

A revised and consolidated international Safety Requirements standard for radioactive waste disposal has been developed over the past three years and its approval and adoption is anticipated by year-end 2009.

The standard covers disposal in near surface facilities of all type, including those for very low-level waste and mining and minerals processing waste, to disposal at depth, from tens to hundreds of metres, for intermediate and high-level waste.

A supporting Safety Guide is under development within the safety standards series the safety case and supporting safety assessment for radioactive waste disposal is under development.

See story resources for more information.