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Media release

Decision of the Federal Council on the Entsorgungsnachweis project

Feasibility of safe deep disposal of high-level waste in Switzerland confirmed

On 28th June, the Federal Council announced its approval of the Entsorgungsnachweis project (demonstration of feasibility of disposal) for high-level waste. The decision of the Federal Council confirms that, in principle, construction of a deep geological repository for high-level waste, spent fuel and long-lived intermediate-level waste is feasible in Switzerland. The federal safety authorities and other national and international experts examined the openly published project documentation in detail and recommended to the Federal Council to grant the project its approval. Today's decision by the Federal Council represents an important milestone in the Swiss radioactive waste management programme. Once the Federal Council has specified the procedures and criteria for site selection in the sectoral plan (Sachplan) for deep geological repositories, the next step will be to initiate the selection procedure for concrete sites for future repositories. Nagra is presently preparing the technical basis for this procedure, which will be conducted under the lead of the Federal Office of Energy.

Nagra's technical reports on the Entsorgungsnachweis project were published in 2002; the project is based on the example of the Opalinus Clay in the region of the Zürcher Weinland. Following a regional field investigation programme and a broadly based selection procedure, the rock type and the investigation area on which the project was to be based were selected in 1994 with the approval of the federal authorities. The scientific results show that the Opalinus Clay in the Zürcher Weinland is suitable as a host rock for construction of a deep repository for high-level waste and that such a facility would meet official protection objectives and criteria. At the end of 2002, Nagra therefore requested the Federal Council to approve the Entsorgungsnachweis project.

Between 2003 and 2005, the technical documentation was reviewed by the federal safety authorities, with positive results: the Federal Nuclear Safety Inspectorate (HSK), the Commission for Nuclear Waste Management (KNE) and the Federal Commission for the Safety of Nuclear Installations (KSA) – as well as international experts of the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) - all gave the project high marks. This was echoed by the German group AkEnd (working group on selection procedures for repository sites), which also gave the Swiss selection procedure its approval.

Significance of the decision

The Nuclear Energy Act calls for a demonstration of safe disposal of radioactive waste. With the approval of the Entsorgungsnachweis project by the Federal Council, an important milestone in the Swiss waste management programme has been reached. Nagra welcomes the decision of the Federal Council and considers it to be a sign of confidence in its research work, which has extended over more than 30 years.

Site selection procedure

In 2002, Nagra also requested the Federal Council to agree to focusing further investigations in the high-level waste programme on the Opalinus Clay in the potential siting area of the Zürcher Weinland. Despite the positive review of the Entsorgungsnachweis project, the Federal Council has rejected this request and, in the meantime, has decided to implement the sectoral plan procedure.

In this open procedure involving the Cantons, neighbouring countries and the public, possible alternatives will be investigated before a site is finally selected.

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According to Swiss nuclear energy legislation, the producers of radioactive waste are responsible for its safe management and disposal. In 1972, the Federal Government and the nuclear power plant operators set up the National Cooperative for the Disposal of Radioactive Waste (Nagra) to perform this task. Nagra, which has its headquarters in Wetztingen (AG), is the national technical competence centre in the field of deep geological disposal of radioactive waste.

Out of a strong sense of responsibility for the long-term protection of man and the environment, 80 employees are involved daily in performing this important work. The high level of competence is secured by targeted research programmes in two Swiss underground rock laboratories and intensive international collaboration.