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Media release

USA becomes a partner in Nagra's Grimsel Test Site

The Department of Energy of the USA (USDOE) has become a research partner in Nagra's Grimsel Test Site, taking part in an international research project looking at the transport behaviour of radioactive substances in granite.

The scientific community in countries producing nuclear power, including Switzerland and the United States of America (USA), has come to recognise that deep geological disposal is the best option for safe, long-term management of high-level radioactive waste resulting from reactor operations. In 2009, the USDOE initiated a Used Fuel Disposition Campaign aimed at conducting research and development for generic repositories in various geological media, including crystalline rock. As a result of its interest in becoming more involved in international collaboration with ongoing R&D programmes, the USDOE decided to join the research programme at Nagra's Grimsel Test Site. Organisations from eleven other countries are currently partners in the underground laboratory projects.

The USA is contributing both manpower and financial support to the "Colloid Formation and Migration" (CFM) project, in which a programme of laboratory and field experiments is looking at the influence of microscopically small particles (colloids that are present in the groundwater in the crystalline rock) on the transport of radioactive substances. Researchers from the Los Alamos National Laboratory in particular will be involved in the development and testing of radionuclide transport models. Jay Jones of the USDOE sees the Grimsel Test Site as an attractive partner: "The existing infrastructure at the site, including the ability to use actual radionuclides in a field setting, and the opportunities for collaboration with several other international partners make the Grimsel Test Site special and unique."

The wide participation in the Grimsel programme also offers interesting perspectives for the other partners: "International exchange of know-how and experience is important in the nuclear waste management field. Everyone involved in the research programme benefits from the results we obtain here", says Ingo Blechschmidt, Manager of the Test Site. At Grimsel, scientists from around the world have been investigating the properties of granite and concepts for emplacing waste in deep repositories since 1984. The laboratory is used exclusively for research purposes.

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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, 100 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.