

17-04-2000

## **Rotten to the core:**

### **Revelations about BNFL's business and Sellafield since publication of the three nuclear installations inspectorate safety reports**

#### **29<sup>th</sup> February Sweden cancels Sellafield spent fuel shipment**

Sweden cancelled a shipment of 4.8 tonnes of spent nuclear fuel from a research reactor to Sellafield. Environment minister Kjell Larsson said the delivery had become "very difficult, if not impossible" to justify in the light of the current safety scandal, which has aggravated long-standing Nordic fury over radioactive discharges into the Sea. Mr Larsson has reportedly also asked Sweden's nuclear power authority to consider whether trade links with Sellafield should be broken off altogether. [ENDS Daily 1<sup>st</sup> March]

#### **2 March 2000 Swiss inspectors uncover more safety irregularities at Sellafield.**

The NII report on the MOX data falsification scandal only looked at MOX fuel ordered by the Japanese, although it mentioned that "one example of falsification has been found dating back to 1996" when fuel was manufactured for Germany, there was no detailed analysis of the data from Swiss and German fuel carried out.

Switzerland's equivalent of the NII, HSK, announced said on 2<sup>nd</sup> March that it too had uncovered irregularities with the safety data on plutonium pellets supplied by British Nuclear Fuels. They had already confirmed that they had discovered faults with the outer cladding of some MOX fuels pins supplied in 1996 for the Beznau reactor. HSK banned further imports of MOX from BNFL on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, but also said that no further Swiss spent fuel would be shipped to Sellafield. HSK said BNFL would need to demonstrate "significant improvements" before the bans were lifted [Independent 3<sup>rd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> March]

#### **2 March 2000 NII impound four batches of uranium fuel at BNFL's Springfields Plant.**

Fuel assemblies due to be dispatched to two of British Energy's reactors were seized because welding in the assemblies were cracked. NII begins a fresh investigation into fuel production at Springfields. BNFL halts the supply of fuel to all seven of British Energy's Advanced Gas Cooled Reactors. [Observer 5<sup>th</sup> March; Financial Times 7<sup>th</sup> March].

#### **7 March 2000 BNFL lowered safety standard to boost output.**

British Nuclear Fuels is accused of certifying sub-standard MOX pellets as safe. It is revealed that instead of measuring the pellets diameter at the top, middle and bottom, all three readings are taken within two millimetres of the middle. The NII's report concentrated on the falsification of manually collected diameter readings, but these readings were taken by the automatic laser micrometer. BNFL were thus able to pass pellets which would otherwise have been rejected. The company did this because of a manufacturing defect that sometimes made one end of

the pellet thicker than the other. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Nuclear Installations admitted that he was not told of the changes to the way the measurements were taken. [Independent 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> March]

### **8<sup>th</sup> March Future of Sellafield in doubt after German ban on BNFL shipments.**

Germany suspended shipments of the controversial Mox plutonium fuel from Sellafield. It is already well known that the German Government would like to see German reprocessing contracts converted to storage. Although BNFL is not currently manufacturing any MOX fuel for German utilities, this announcement was a severe blow to the future of the Sellafield MOX plant (SMP). The SMP currently has contracts for only 6.7% of its capacity over the first ten years. This amounts to about 50 tonnes. Some two-thirds of these contracts are with German utilities. Even if the German ban is lifted some or all of these contracts must now be in doubt. The new Chief Executive, Norman Askew, admitted that SMP would face difficulties obtaining government approval. [Independent 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> March, Times 16<sup>th</sup> March]

### **17<sup>th</sup> March BNFL's Confidential "Reputation Recovery" Plan leaked to The Express.**

Key customers, the Government and politicians have all lost confidence in BNFL, and employees are disaffected with senior management. Management were said to be so "shell-shocked" they can no longer understand the gravity of their problems. The memo asks "...can BNFL reposition itself as one of the good guys by focussing on decommissioning and clean-up?". [Express 17<sup>th</sup> March]

### **21<sup>st</sup> March BNFL "will never make profit on Mox fuel".**

Gordon MacKerron, head of the energy programme at Sussex University's science policy research unit, told the House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee that it was more or less inevitable that the world market in MOX fuel would decline over time "because it has no commercial logic" to it. Dr MacKerron calculated that the current price of uranium would have to rise four-fold before MOX becomes commercially attractive, and that is unlikely to happen. [See "BNFL and the proposed PPP: A Memorandum for the House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee" by Gordon MacKerron 9<sup>th</sup> March 2000]

### **23 March Activists demand US ends BNFL contracts**

The full extent of BNFL's fall from grace became clearer when a coalition of more than 40 environmental and anti-nuclear groups in the United States petitioned the US Administration. They asked the US Administration to suspend decommissioning a nuclear clean-up contracts with British Nuclear Fuels and to bar the company from competing for US business in future. One of the targets which the Department of Trade and Industry set for BNFL to achieve before the partial privatisation would go ahead was increasing its profits from work in the US by 15%. On 27<sup>th</sup> March the US Energy Secretary put on hold a contract for British Nuclear Fuels to build a waste incinerator at the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory. [Independent 24<sup>th</sup> & 29<sup>th</sup> March; FT 28<sup>th</sup> March]

**24 March Japanese signal end to BNFL contracts.**

Japanese politicians say they intend to veto any business with British Nuclear Fuels unless the shipment of flawed plutonium fuel pellets delivered six months ago is returned to Britain. [Independent 25<sup>th</sup> March]

**26<sup>th</sup> March Sellafield Sabotage Alert**

Wiring on a robot arm which handles high level nuclear waste was deliberately cut by an unknown saboteur sometime during February. An investigation is being carried out by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Constabulary, with all workers in the vitrification plant being fingerprinted. Although BNFL said the damage was not a safety problem, there were fears expressed about what the saboteur might do next. The unions wrote to staff asking them to identify the saboteur if they knew who it was. [Sunday Times 26<sup>th</sup> March; Guardian 27<sup>th</sup> March]

**27 March 2000 Irish Energy Minister & Danish Environment meet to discuss Sellafield.**

Ireland & Denmark are to put a proposal before the next OSPAR meeting calling for an end to nuclear reprocessing. OSPAR is an international treaty, which controls marine pollution in the north east Atlantic. Its next meeting will be held in Copenhagen in the last week of June. Denmark is confident of support from Iceland and Norway, and probably Sweden, Finland and Germany as well. [Guardian, Financial Times, Express & Times 28<sup>th</sup> March]

**27<sup>th</sup> March 2000 Sizewell B to buy its fuel from Germany**

BNFL's Springfields plant is to lose the contract to manufacture fuel for Britain's only Pressurised Water reactor at Sizewell B. British Energy has now signed a contract with Siemens, and the fuel will be manufactured in Germany. [East Anglian Daily Times 28<sup>th</sup> March]

**28 March 2000 Germans accuse BNFL of lying.**

The German government accused British Nuclear Fuels of lying about the outcome of a recent meeting between its officials and the company's senior representatives. BNFL had said that Germany had agreed to lift its ban on MOX imports after the NII allows resumption of MOX manufacture. The German Environment Ministry said "BNFL's press release is as reliable as its forged test results".

**29<sup>th</sup> March Government abandons sale of BNFL until after next Election.**

The £1.5bn partial privatisation of BNFL was shelved because of the continuing safety fears surrounding the company. The earliest possible sell-off date is now late 2002. Tony Blair told the Commons "big changes" were needed in the way the company is managed. [Most newspapers 30<sup>th</sup> March]

**30<sup>th</sup> March BNFL admits reprocessing may have to end**

British Nuclear Fuels admitted to the Commons Trade and Industry Committee that it might have to think the "unthinkable" and switch to

storing rather than reprocessing nuclear waste after conceding that its two biggest overseas customers may never place any more orders. Senior BNFL executives conceded that further German orders were "in doubt" while there was little prospect of new contracts from Japan unless the scandal over falsified safety records at Sellafield was resolved. Asked whether the company would have to examine storing instead of reprocessing the spent fuel, Hugh Collum, BNFL's chairman said: "We must be in a position to look at the unthinkable. Over the course of time we will look at these alternatives. We have no plans to change our strategy. If we have a viable profit base we have no intention of getting out of reprocessing, but we must be prepared to look at alternatives."

Mr Collum told MPs that BNFL was likely to miss all six government-set targets for improving safety, environmental and financial performance this year. The Government "scorecard" requires BNFL to improve productivity, profitability, health, safety and environmental performance, cut costs by 25 per cent and increase United States profits to 15 per cent of the group total.

The Commons committee chairman, Martin O'Neill, warned that the National Audit Office would be brought in to examine BNFL's report and accounts if they were not made more "intelligible". "The industry as a whole has treated the Government, parliament and the country with a degree of disdain with regard to getting hard financial facts," Mr O'Neill complained. [Independent 31<sup>st</sup> March]

### **31<sup>st</sup> March British Energy wants more storage and less reprocessing.**

British Energy told the Commons Trade and Industry Committee that it wanted savings of £1bn on its reprocessing contracts. British Energy's contracts with BNFL include the option for either reprocessing or storage.

### **1<sup>st</sup> April Nuclear flasks fail tests.**

Flasks used by BNFL to transport uranium hexafluoride around the world - the raw material to make nuclear fuel - failed tests carried out by France's nuclear safety agency. The agency said the flasks would rupture within 175 seconds in a fire. [Guardian 1<sup>st</sup> April]

### **1<sup>st</sup> April. Leaked report shows reprocessing is twice as polluting as storage.**

A report prepared for the OSPAR Commission by the Nuclear Energy Agency of the OECD concludes that reprocessing is dirtier than storage, even when the most optimistic assumptions are made [Independent 1<sup>st</sup> April]

### **2<sup>nd</sup> April Workers used forged passes at Sellafield.**

Four workers were sacked for forging entry passes. The deception fooled security guards for several weeks. The workers altered their passes to allow them to bring their vehicles on site. [Sunday Times 2<sup>nd</sup> April]

## **2<sup>nd</sup> April Environment Agency Slams BNFL**

The Environmental Agency accused BNFL of a "lack of commitment to environmental protection". A report submitted to the agency's board meeting in March said "There have been a number of incidents at BNFL sites which have led the agency to question seriously the competence of BNFL's management of radioactive waste and its commitment to environmental protection.". The agency has taken legal action for breaches of environmental rules against BNFL plants at Springfields near Preston, at Hinkley Point in Somerset, and at Sellafield. Incidents at Hinkley Point were "particularly serious", says the agency, because BNFL misreported its radiation discharges and broke the legal limit for emitting the radioactive gas, carbon 14.

In a letter to BNFL in March, the Environment Agency's director of operations, Archie Robertson, said his inspectors were concerned that "serious shortcomings may be developing in BNFL's management systems as a consequence of resource limitations, a lack of awareness amongst staff of waste disposal authorisations issued by the agency and a general lack of recognition of the importance of environmental issues." One example he gave was the leakage of radioactivity from Sellafield caused by pigeons. The birds roosted in contaminated buildings and then flew through holes in the roofs to a garden in a nearby village where they were fed by bird-lovers. BNFL had to decontaminate the garden.

In papers posted on the agency's website, Robertson also accused BNFL of being "less than co-operative" in providing information. "I find it difficult to accept BNFL's attitude towards the request for information as one that would be expected from an organisation with a positive commitment to environmental management," he said.

In addition the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) is planning to send a report to the procurator fiscal within the next few days about an accident at Chapelcross last September. The report will allege that BNFL breached the Radioactive Substances Act by allowing radioactive waste to leak into a stream. [Sunday Herald 2<sup>nd</sup> April Guardian 15<sup>th</sup> April and [www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)]

## **2<sup>nd</sup> April Sellafield Cancer Report**

Young children living in coastal areas around the Sellafield nuclear plant in Cumbria are up to four times more likely to get a brain tumour, according to a confidential report funded by the Irish Government. And those aged under five with homes close to the Welsh coast have more than double the risk of developing cancer than youngsters living further inland, according to the study. [Sunday Express 2<sup>nd</sup> April]

## **14<sup>th</sup> April Leaked documents show BNFL write government replies.**

British Nuclear Fuels appears to have dictated the wording of replies for the Department of Trade and Industry to Parliamentary Questions and to letters from people, including an Irish MP who have written to the government about Sellafield.

BNFL was also involved in a series of dirty tricks campaigns to unsettle and mislead MPs. It planned to use back-bench Labour MPs "to stuff" the environment minister Michael Meacher's proposal for a public inquiry into the discharges of nuclear waste into the Irish sea. It also targeted Rudi Vis MP, who ran a successful campaign to stop trains carrying dangerous spent nuclear waste fuel from parking overnight at the back of homes in Cricklewood, north London. Other documents reveal collusion between the Department of Trade and Industry and BNFL to "bury" from public scrutiny a plan to increase the speed of trains carrying spent nuclear waste fuel to 60mph. [Guardian and Channel 4 Dispatches 13<sup>th</sup> April]

#### **14<sup>th</sup> April High Level Waste Tanks unlikely to be emptied on schedule**

Gordon Thompson, from the Institute for Resource and Security Studies in Massachusetts, told a conference in Ireland that BNFL would miss its 2015 deadline to empty the 1,300 litres of high-level waste, which contain 2,100kg of Caesium-137. Experts believe the 21 steel tanks are vulnerable to explosion through accidental contamination. [Independent 14<sup>th</sup> April]

#### **17<sup>th</sup> April Sellafield to fire at least 45 of its supervisors**

At least 45 supervisors at the British Nuclear Fuels plant at Sellafield are expected to be sacked, as part of a major purge of the company's middle management. The management review, which has been ordered by the Government, is aimed at persuading both domestic opinion and foreign clients that BNFL has responded seriously to criticism of its operations. [Independent 17<sup>th</sup> April]