

OSPAR – Greenpeace briefing

What is OSPAR?

The OSPAR Convention is an international treaty charged with preventing and eliminating pollution of the marine environment in the North East Atlantic. The Convention covers the Irish Sea, into which BNFL daily discharges 8 million litres of radioactive waste. It also covers the seas most directly affected by Sellafield's spreading contamination.

The member states of the OSPAR Commission are Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the European Union, represented by the European Commission.

The OSPAR Commission meets annually. This year, the meeting will take place in Copenhagen from 26 – 30 June.

In order to be adopted by the OSPAR Commission, a proposal must be supported by at least a three quarters majority. A resolution is legally binding on those governments who sign up.

What is the Danish proposal?

On 24 March 2000, the Danish Government tabled a proposal to ban reprocessing in the area covered by the OSPAR Convention. The ban will therefore cover both Sellafield and the La Hague reprocessing plant in France, as well as preventing any resumption of reprocessing at Dounreay in Scotland.

The Danish proposal demands the immediate suspension of reprocessing and the conversion of reprocessing contracts into dry storage ones instead.

Why does it matter?

All Contracting Parties to the OSPAR Convention must 'take all possible steps to prevent and eliminate marine pollution'.

In addition, in July 1998, the UK Government signed up to the 'Sintra agreement' which committed it to achieving 'further substantial reduction or elimination of discharges, emissions and losses of radioactive substances' by 2000. The intention was to achieve 'close to zero' concentrations of radioactive pollutants in the environment by 2020.

When the Government signed the Sintra agreement, it claimed it was finally shedding the UK's tag as the 'Dirty Man of Europe'.

The only way the UK Government can keep its promise is by agreeing to stop reprocessing in 2000. Since the Sintra agreement, however, the Government has done nothing to reduce Sellafield's discharges.

Significantly, other governments have also called for the end of reprocessing even before the beginning of the OSPAR meeting – the Irish, Norwegian and Icelandic Governments have all said they want reprocessing to stop.

This June's OSPAR Convention meeting presents a unique opportunity finally to stop reprocessing at Sellafield, and the deadly pollution it inevitably produces. If the UK refuses to listen to its neighbours, the UK Government would show that it is taking a leading role in international environmental policy making. If it chooses to vote against it, the Government will ensure that this country continues to deserve to be called the Dirty Man of Europe.