

## **OSPAR and Radioactive Discharges from Sellafield**

The UK's Environment Minister will be in Bremen, Germany, on June 25th and 26<sup>th</sup> for a meeting of Ministers who have signed that OSPAR Convention (the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic). This will be the first such gathering since 1998, when the UK made commitments to its European neighbours to reduce radioactive discharges from Sellafield into the sea. The UK can expect some severe criticism for its lack of progress over the past five years.

### **What is OSPAR?**

There are 16 Contracting Parties:- Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the European Commission. The OSPAR Commission, a body of civil servants, meets annually to discuss the mechanics of implementing the Convention. OSPAR Ministerial Meetings (meetings of Environment Ministers from all OSPAR Contracting Parties) take place every 5 years or so in order to set political commitments and to review progress towards meeting them.

### **What has OSPAR done about Radioactive Substances?**

Discharges of radioactive substances into the sea, particularly from the two spent fuel reprocessing plants in Europe (Sellafield in Cumbria and La Hague in Northern France), have dominated discussions since OSPAR was set up. In practice, however, OSPAR has achieved almost nothing.

### **What happened in 1998?**

At the last Ministerial meeting held in Sintra, Portugal in July 1998, all Parties agreed to:

1. work towards achieving further substantial reductions of discharges, **by the year 2000; and**
2. progressive and substantial reductions in radioactive discharges to achieve **by the year 2020** close to zero concentrations in the marine environment above historic levels.

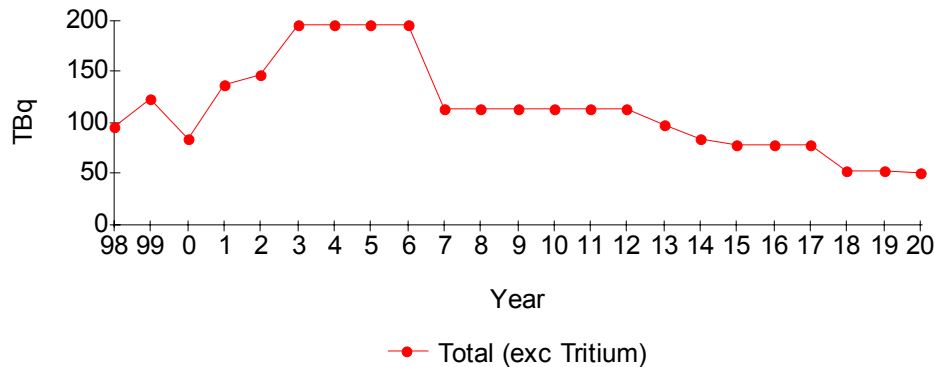
After Sintra, the UK's Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, famously declared "*I was ashamed of Britain's record in the past but now we have shed the tag of the Dirty Man of Europe and have joined the family of nations*".

### **Has anything happened since Sintra?**

Instead of 'progressive and substantial reductions', discharges from Sellafield are higher now than in 1998 and are set to double over the next few years (see graph<sup>i</sup>). Far from shedding its 'Dirty Man of Europe' tag, the UK is now in danger of adding to it the accolade of "Dishonest Man of Europe" as it attempts to claim progress when it has done nothing in five years to deal with its radioactive discharges.

## Likely Sellafield Discharges 1998-2020

BNFL Business Plan



### So what have the other OSPAR countries been doing?

At the annual meeting of the OSPAR Commission in Copenhagen in 2000, all Contracting Parties apart from the UK and France agreed a decision which required the implementation of "...the non-reprocessing option (for example dry storage) for spent nuclear fuel management...". In practice, this has had no effect, precisely because of its non-acceptance by the UK and France.

### Any other progress?

The UK and France have actively been obstructing OSPAR's progress in order to ensure business as usual for nuclear reprocessing. In five years since the supposedly "groundbreaking" decision, OSPAR has failed even to agree a 'baseline' against which progress is supposed to be measured. Each country has prepared a national plan reportedly showing how they will implement the Sintra agreement, but none of these have been reviewed. And yet it is clear from the UK's National Plan<sup>ii</sup> that the large increases planned in throughput for Sellafield's reprocessing plants will cause radioactive discharges to go up. Meanwhile, the failed commitment to work towards substantial reductions of discharges by 2000 has simply been deleted.

### Doesn't the UK say it has to increase discharges to decommission some of its nuclear facilities?

UK Ministers claim that decommissioning parts of Sellafield would increase discharges<sup>iii</sup>. In fact these increases are NOT because plants are being decommissioned, but precisely the reverse. Discharges from Sellafield over the next few years could be twice as high as in 1998 because the UK refuses to bring forward the closure of its old, loss-making, Magnox reactors. Reprocessing spent nuclear waste fuel from these reactors causes much of Sellafield's pollution.

### Anything else the UK could do?

The UK Government could have responded to British Energy's (BE) financial problems by ending the reprocessing of spent fuel from the UK's newer reactors through THORP<sup>iv</sup>, saving BE around £250m per year. This would end the pointless production of plutonium that nobody wants, reduce the production of nuclear waste, further reduce discharges and allow a much earlier closure of THORP (possibly around 2006/7).

## And what's all this about Technetium-99 (Tc-99)?

Tc-99 is one of the substances discharged from Sellafield into the Irish Sea. Since 1994, when discharges increased and Tc-99 began to accumulate in seaweed and lobsters, both Ireland and Norway have been pressing the UK for an end to these discharges. In December 2002, UK Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Margaret Beckett proposed a moratorium on discharges of Tc-99 while BNFL tested technology to solidify the Tc-99. The Environment Agency now thinks that the technology is unlikely to be successful, so a moratorium is looking unlikely. Since storing liquid Tc-99 on land would require the construction of replacement tanks, something the Government appears unwilling to pay for, discharges of Tc-99 into the Irish Sea are expected to remain high until 2006.

## So what should happen at Bremen?

After five years of work it's clear that further measures are essential if OSPAR is to achieve its objectives on radioactive discharges<sup>v</sup>. The UK Government's National Plan fails to meet the commitments made by John Prescott in 1998. Without further measures, including the implementation of the non-reprocessing option for the management of spent nuclear fuel, the upcoming OSPAR Ministerial Meeting in Bremen will be a failure.

## In summary

The credibility of OSPAR, and therefore its future value as a progressive and protective regional convention, will be seriously damaged if the UK and France are not held to account. These countries should not be allowed to get away with signing up to "progressive and substantial reductions" in radioactive discharges and then increasing them.

Until Bremen, the non-reprocessing countries can legitimately blame the UK and France for preventing the progressive and substantial reduction in radioactive discharges to the marine environment. **After Bremen, unless they are prepared to hold UK and France fully and publicly to account, the blame will lie with all of them.**

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### <sup>i</sup> EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. Discharges for 1998-2002 (incl.) are actual discharges.
2. Discharges for 2003-2006 (incl.) are based on the assumption that both reprocessing plants achieve full throughput (based on figures given by BNFL to the Stakeholder Dialogue Discharges Working Group).
3. Discharges for 2007-2012 are based on the assumption that both reprocessing plants achieve full throughput, but technetium-99 (Tc-99) discharges fall from the current level of around 80TBq per year to around 1 TBq per year after implementation of the Environment Agency's proposals (NB this still would lead to higher discharges than in 1998 when the commitment was given at Sintra to lower discharges).
4. BNFL has said that it will close the B205 Magnox reprocessing plant around the end of 2012. However there is a time lag of five years before some discharges are reduced. The discharges for 2013-2018 are based on the assumption that Magnox reprocessing ends at the end of 2012.
5. The discharges for 2019-2020 assume that THORP is still operating at full throughput.

<sup>ii</sup> UK Strategy for Radioactive Discharges 2001 – 2020, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, July 2002. [www.defra.gov.uk/environment/radioactivity/discharge/strategy/index.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/radioactivity/discharge/strategy/index.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> Irish Times 29<sup>th</sup> May 2003.

<sup>iv</sup> There are two reprocessing plants at Sellafield: the older Magnox Reprocessing Plant and the Thermal Oxide Reprocessing Plant (THORP) which opened in 1994. Apart from a small amount of Magnox spent fuel from Japan, all foreign reprocessing contracts are carried out in THORP.

<sup>v</sup> The 2003 OSPAR Radioactive Substances Committee Progress Report on the More Detailed Implementation of the OSPAR Strategy with Regard to Radioactive Substances records that (para 35) "*Denmark, Ireland and Norway consider that it is already possible to conclude that further measures, additional to those already contained within national plans, will be necessary to address discharges from the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuels, in order to achieve progressive and substantial reductions in radioactive discharges and to meet the objectives of the Strategy within its timeframe*".