

British Pugwash Group

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Decisions Needed on Plutonium Stockpile

New Report from British Pugwash Highlights
Need for Increased Public Access to Information

The UK is at a technical and strategic cross-roads. Over the past 50 years it has built up the world's largest stockpile of separated plutonium, about 100 tons. The UK Government is facing key decisions about what to do with this stockpile, and indeed whether it should continue its policy of separating plutonium.

To help encourage informed debate of this critical issue by policy makers and the public, an eminent working party of British Pugwash has produced a new report, "The Management of Separated Plutonium in the UK." The report is an "optioneering study" which identifies some major issues which must be tackled if the expansion of nuclear power is to be considered as a viable future energy option both in the UK and world wide.

According to Dr Christopher Watson, Deputy Chair of British Pugwash, "The strategy developed in the 1990s for utilising the UK stockpile of separated plutonium is currently in disarray. There is no immediately practicable policy to use the existing plutonium stockpile. The UK does not have an agreed strategy for correcting its historical mistakes in this area, and the current arrangements for storing the stockpile are vulnerable to various threats (theft or terrorist attack). If other countries followed the UK's historic practice on plutonium production, the risk of nuclear weapon proliferation would increase. The world does not at present have a sustainable energy strategy which does not involve producing substantial amounts of separated plutonium."

The new report identifies three options for the management of the UK stockpile:

1. **Do nothing** – leave the plutonium in essentially its current physical form, and do no more than is necessary to keep the risks involved in storing it at an acceptably low level.
2. **Bury it** – put the plutonium into a form which can be safely disposed of as a waste material in a suitably designed repository (when that becomes available at some future date).
3. **Burn it** – convert the plutonium into nuclear fuel which is suitable for use in existing or reasonably foreseeable future reactors, either in this country or elsewhere.

According to Watson, "The eventual solution may involve a mixture of two, and very possibly all three of these options. In the short run, the UK has no alternative but to make option 1 work, and that is again difficult because of the inadequate protection of our existing plutonium stores against the latest manifestations of the terrorist threat." Watson continued, "It is to be hoped that before the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and (eventually) HMG reach a decision on how to move forward in this area, it will satisfy itself that it has answers to the many questions identified in the report. In our view most of these answers could properly be made publicly available. A few cannot, for obvious security reasons, and this will have to be taken into account in reaching the final decision. However before then, it would be very good if the decision-takers sought to involve the public in their decision to the maximum possible extent, since a positive outcome will depend strongly on public acceptance." ENDS

This report will be released as part of an event on "Securing Fissile Material: National and International Aspects," 26 November 2009, 1430 – 1730, cosponsored with VERTIC, Development House, 56-64 Leonard Street, London EC2A 4LT. RSVP to sibutcher@earthlink.net or mobile 07920 747 560.