

Briefing paper - Nuclear power

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1. What is the current Greenhouse Gas output for this sector? Are there any expected changes?

Although nuclear reactors may not emit CO₂ when producing electricity, the nuclear fuel cycle does, covering as it does everything from uranium mining and milling through fuel transportation to waste transportation and future disposal.

The level of emissions especially depends on uranium ore grade, uranium ore type, Uranium 235 enrichment method, future nuclear waste plans and the excavation of any underground repository.

The nuclear industry is running out of high-grade uranium ore. The average ore grade used at the moment is 15% (1.5g uranium oxide to 1kg of rock). At ore grades of between 0.01 and 0.02%, carbon emissions from nuclear power approach those of a gas-fired power station.

In the UK, nuclear power provides around 20% of electricity, but only about 8% of total energy. Allowing for losses at the power station, it provides only 3.6% of the power we use. In any case it will take until around 2020 for any new reactors to come on stream. The last time a UK government committed to building 10 nuclear power stations, in 1979, only one station was built, and then only after 15 years (Sizewell).

According to the UK Association for the Conservation of Energy, one new nuclear reactor operating by 2020 could deliver just over one million tonnes of carbon saving. Energy efficiency “could save around 25 million tonnes of carbon through cost-effective energy efficiency measures” by that date. Any diversion of funds into investment in nuclear reactors will worsen the problem because the money will buy less of a carbon reduction than it would have if spent on energy efficiency.

2. What is it the sector doing about climate change?

Seeing it as a fantastic PR opportunity and trying to reposition itself as a source of “clean energy”.

As nuclear only supplies electricity, and most of our power generation goes to provide heating, it can only ever have a small role in reducing CO₂ emissions. The most worrying

risk associated with commissioning new reactors is that it will divert attention and resources from renewable energy and energy efficiency.

3. Are there any upcoming “hooks” to campaign around?

The 1976 Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution recommended “There should be no commitment to a large programme of nuclear fission power until it has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that a method exists to ensure the safe containment of long-lived, highly radioactive waste for the indefinite future”. This still does not exist.

Ongoing safety problems: In 2006 British Energy admitted finding 90 defects at one site, leaks at another and agreed that only 1 of its 8 plants was operating normally. The government was unable to sell its 65% stake in the company because it is regarded as such a bad investment.

4. How does the sector get its finance?

A new generation of nuclear power stations will require very large Government subventions, subsidies, insurance guarantees, and market interventions. EDF has offered to build nuclear power stations in Britain at no cost to the taxpayer, but wants a guaranteed price for its electricity and a fast-track planning process.

5. How does the sector do its greenwash?

The nuclear industry has put enormous amounts of resources into greenwash. For example, at the end of 2004 British Energy appointed Monsanto’s former top UK lobbyist as head of government affairs, and then hired former energy minister Helen Liddell on a short-term contract to provide “strategic advice”. In early 2005 the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority appointed as new communications director a member of the BAA PR team that successfully brought us Heathrow’s terminal 5. The industry also ran various “off the record” events for journalists. The current Labour MP for Copeland was BNFL’s press officer; according to PR Week, he was selected from a shortlist composed exclusively of PR professionals, all but one of whom had connections to the nuclear industry.

The industry uses various PR firms. BNFL uses Weber Shandwick, PR21, Bell Pottinger Communications and financial PR company Finsbury. Philip Dewhurst, its corporate affairs director, was previously CEO of Weber Shandwick UK and told PR Week that the company was using the classic PR technique of using a third party, PR outfit Strategic Awareness, to

put forward the pro-nuclear message: “We spread that via third-party opinion because the public would be suspicious if we started ramming pro-nuclear messages down their throats”.

Several former BNFL executives are now with Integrated Decision Management, a pro-nuclear virtual consultancy that has been helping the ostensibly independent Committee on Radioactive Waste Management to assess nuclear waste options.

In 2003 British Energy took on PPS Group, a PR agency that specialises in influencing local government, especially with regard to planning issues.