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Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

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Your ref:
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Councillor Keith Hitchen
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19th November 2012

Dear Mr Hitchen

Thank you for your letter dated 22 October 2012 about the Managing Radioactive Waste Safely process in west Cumbria which raised a number of issues and in particular the issue of geology. I recognise that there is significant concern about the suitability of the geology in west Cumbria, and welcome the opportunity to hear about this directly from you. I am keen that we should use the pause in the MRWS process to take a good look at concerns being raised and the extent to which they may be capable of being answered.

There are a few points I would like to make in response to your letter, but I would also welcome the opportunity to meet directly with you and, if appropriate, representatives from CALC, before the Decision Making Bodies are due to consider the issues at the end of January.

While I understand your view that there is an urgent need to clarify the current uncertainty as to the potential suitability of the geology before going further with the MRWS process, this does present a rather significant dilemma.

The current state of knowledge about the deep geology in west Cumbria is necessarily limited. While surface geology can be well characterised, we are contemplating that the geological disposal facility may be at a depth of up to 1,000 metres (3,300 feet). Developing a good understanding of the geology at this depth is potentially time consuming and expensive. While communities may be reluctant to proceed without clarity that the geology is likely to be suitable, equally we should be hesitant about spending hundreds of millions of pounds to characterise the geology without a reasonable degree of comfort that the community would actually be willing to host the facility should the geology prove suitable.

A way out of this dilemma was set out in the MRWS White Paper back in 2008. Essentially it envisaged a step-wise process with stages set out such that a volunteer community could make progress without being committed to progressing further and

that confidence could be established which would justify increasingly in-depth geological assessment.

I think it is important in this context to keep firmly in mind that the decision that the local authorities will be facing at the end of January is not to commit to host the geological disposal facility. Rather it is a decision to proceed to the next stage to see whether potentially suitable sites can be identified for further investigation.

Although I appreciate that there are concerns, I do think that we depart from the MRWS process at our peril. It was a well thought out process which seeks earnestly to reconcile conflicting concerns.

Having said that, I think there is scope to work within the overall MRWS process to see what can be done to help meet concerns being voiced. I have concluded that the so-called "desk studies" phase of the MRWS process needs a thorough re-examination. I have asked the NDA to consider what options we have of accelerating the assessment of the geology so that this uncertainty can be progressively reduced as quickly as possible. I think we need CoRWM to advise us on this too.

However, I do not agree that it is possible to reach a reliable or meaningful view about the suitability of deep geology with a quick peer review of existing evidence. At this stage it is wrong to rule out the whole of west Cumbria as having unsuitable geology. We simply do not know enough about the deep geology in the region to make such a conclusion. Self appointed experts who argue that we can definitely rule out the area are wrong and are not proceeding in an evidence-based manner. Of course we all wish that we could make more definitive statements at this stage, but I am firmly advised this is not possible.

I think there are two key principles we should adhere to here. First, we should actually assess the geology of the region in a sensible and evidence-based way. This will take time and require investment. In line with the process set out in the MRWS White Paper, before embarking on significant expenditure, I think we need to have a signal from the community that it is prepared to consider hosting a facility, and hence willing to move on to the next stage of the MRWS process.


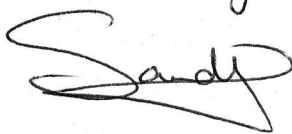
Second, we should be clear that for any potential location chosen, it will have to be demonstrated that should there be any prospect of radioactivity reaching the surface in thousands of years to come, it must not contribute significantly to the levels of radioactivity all around us in the environment from natural background sources. I think we all need to be clear that the combination of engineered barriers and underlying geology must meet this exacting criterion and that environmental and safety regulators will simply not countenance any proposal which does not do so.

Finally, I appreciate that there is a concern that despite what is set out in the White Paper, communities might lose their right of withdrawal at too early a stage. In considering the points put to me by the County and Borough Councils, I am keen to explore how best we can meet this concern and ensure that the right of withdrawal is underpinned appropriately, for example by rights enshrined in legislation.

It follows from these arguments that I continue to believe the right course is to follow the MRWS process, for the local authorities to decide in January whether or not they wish

to continue with the process and if they do to then focus on working hard to accelerate the assessment of the geology so that this uncertainty can be progressively reduced as quickly as possible. Of course I respect the right of the Decision Making Bodies to withdraw from the process, but I think that it would be a pity to withdraw on the basis that the geology is not suitable or that suitability has not at this stage been sufficiently established. That would be premature to say the least.

Kindest regards



BARONESS VERMA