

Cottrell call for coal

A FORMER chief scientific adviser to the British Cabinet has involved himself in the continuing debate on the UK's energy prospects by publicly criticising the government for failing to appreciate the central importance of Britain's coal resources. In a letter to a leading newspaper last week Sir Alan Cottrell expressed concern that the country will face a serious energy deficiency when North Sea oil reserves are largely depleted in around 15 years time.

He called for an increased programme of government research into the extraction and efficient utilisation of coal so that Britain can fill the post-1990 energy gap, arguing that the country cannot hope to meet its future

energy requirements with nuclear power alone. It is estimated that by the year 2000, when nuclear output will only have doubled, Britain will face an energy gap equivalent to 20 times its present installed nuclear capacity.

Sir Alan says the present level of capital investment is insufficient to finance nuclear development on the necessary scale, and the recent cut-back in the nuclear industry has resulted in a decline in the available constructional capacity. He adds that there is also a lack of public support for an expanding nuclear programme, and that a problem of uranium fuel shortage will arise.

He sees a fuller exploitation of British coal reserves as unavoidable, and argues that economic means of extracting coal from difficult deposits,

almost certainly by remotely operated machines, must be developed; and that techniques for producing high-grade, low sulphur fuel oil and gas from coal must be advanced. Research into both of those problems is already well under way but Sir Alan says the programme will have to be stepped up if Britain is to come within range of its target in the time available.

The letter nevertheless endorses the recent enjoiner from the UK Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution that the government press ahead with the construction of a demonstration fast breeder reactor. And EEC policy regarding fusion reactors comes in for a timely sideswipe: according to Sir Alan, fusion reactors will not be ready for many years yet on the "presently dilatory time scale". □

REGIONAL economic communities brought into being for the mutual benefit of their members will always experience difficulty deciding on the location of cooperative projects. The EEC is no exception, and last week provided a nice example of the problems involved.

The project was the Community's ambitious thermonuclear fusion programme for 1976-80, and the issue was the location of its acknowledged centrepiece, the large experimental rig called the Joint European Torus (JET). The result, at a Council of Ministers meeting in Brussels devoted to collaboration in scientific research, was that Italy blocked the programme—and the reason was that it wanted the project sited at the Nine's Joint Research Centre at Ispra in Northern Italy.

The European Commission, whose plans for this fourth thermonuclear fusion programme involve an expenditure over the four years of some £250 million, will not make a formal recommendation on the location until the new year, but has indicated a preference for Ispra.

Germany and France have had reservations, however, while Britain has pressed for the project to be sited at the Culham Laboratory of the UK Atomic Energy Authority. Unlike the other eight countries, Italy was not prepared to endorse the expenditure without a commitment to a location.

The Italian veto—for that is what it amounts to—marks a setback to a project which offers the possibility in the long term of an independent source of energy within the Community. Thermonuclear fusion is arguably a key to Community energy supplies beyond the end of the century, and marks one branch of re-

search in which Europe is abreast of both the USA and the USSR. Herr Guido Brunner, the Brussels Commissioner responsible for scientific research, describing the delay as a "great error", warned that the Community's strong position in fusion research was in danger of being lost without an early go-ahead on the programme.

EEC diary

● Further signs of movement towards a European energy policy surfaced ahead of last week's Paris meeting between oil producers and consumers, for which the EEC finally acquired a mandate after the procedural difficulties that dogged the Rome summit meeting.

Apart from agreeing that average community oil consumption in the next two years should be a little below the 1973 level, a meeting of the Nine's foreign ministers received a progress report from the Commission on a directive under which member countries are obliged to keep an emergency oil reserve equivalent to 90 days' supply.

The requirement was fulfilled in June this year—when stocks were sufficient for 95 days' consumption. Although down from 101 days in January, the main problem was that the level was only for the Community as a whole. Some countries—West Germany, Italy, Holland, Belgium and Ireland—had failed to introduce the necessary legal measures to give effect to the directive, which came into force at the beginning of the year.

The Commission now intends to

take legal action against these countries, although it admitted there were difficulties in stock building because of the large amounts of capital it immobilised and the balance of payments burden it imposed on the countries concerned.

● In the UK a recently published House of Lords Select Committee report criticises a Commission resolution calling for the standardisation of nuclear safety regulations within the EEC. The report, which comes only months after the committee strongly criticised Commission proposals for a Community energy policy, also attacks accompanying proposals that approval procedures for nuclear plant should be centralised in Brussels and that a body should be established to coordinate discussion of nuclear safety.

If the proposals are adopted, existing safety standards could suffer, the report says. The committee's chairman, Lord Lauderdale, said this was because the Brussels administration, with no real experts of its own, would preoccupy experts already working on safety problems.

The report says that to standardise safety proposals is impractical because "different types of reactor are in use, and design is developing". Standardisation will be "social rather than strictly commercial", and centralisation of approval procedures is seen as dangerous because "the ability to make direct representations to accessible elected representatives at a public enquiry is a valuable safety valve which would be lost". The establishment of a body to act as a catalyst for the international discussion of safety measures is, according to the report, unnecessary in view of the plethora of organisations already in existence.