

a system of fast breeders was a matter of greater dispute.

From all accounts the participants agreed that if reprocessing was to be done at all, it could be done most reliably at Windscale. There was also fairly wide agreement that technically speaking enough could be done to combat the threat of proliferation, but that the problem of public acceptability—the all-important political dimension

—would remain. Had any of the participants retained doubts on that score, the other weekend meeting might have helped to dispel them.

Now, with few new arguments to present or to hear, everyone with any influence over the shape of Britain's nuclear policy is hoping for just one thing: that with decisions ultimately a matter only of a signature, Mr Benn will have a restful summer. □

SWITZERLAND

Guidelines emerge

Rosmarie Waldner reports from Zurich on Swiss moves to produce guidelines for genetic manipulation experiments

A Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences Committee founded in 1975, the Commission for Experimental Genetics, recently took the first step towards regulating genetic manipulation in Switzerland when it sent a circular to all researchers in the field of recombinant DNA recommending observance of the guidelines laid down by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), Switzerland. It sent a circular to the guidelines issued for NIH researchers in June last year. The Swiss guidelines, however, are not legally binding, although they are considered to be obligatory for the researcher. The committee also wants research projects to be registered, in line with the recommendations of the Strasbourg-based European Science Foundation (ESF).

The commission, under the presidency of Professor Werner Arber of the Biozentrum of the University of Basle, is of the opinion that "things as they stand at present do not justify issuing an official order. The caution expected of researchers in this field, with its legal basis in the Epidemic Law, should ensure general observance of the recommended guidelines". The Swiss Epidemic Law regulates measures in connection with infectious diseases and is one of the few laws in the field of public health valid in all parts of Switzerland; public health, not being a federal matter, is under the jurisdiction of Switzerland's 25 cantons.

At their annual conference held in early April the Swiss Society for Cellular and Molecular Biology discussed the guidelines and voted overwhelmingly in favour in them. However, some speakers demanded that the guidelines be made legally binding and that the public should be brought into the discussion. Altogether six laboratories at the universities of Basle, Geneva and Zurich and at the im-

munology institute of the pharmaceutical company Hoffman-La Roche in Basle are working with recombinant DNA.

The commission is available for advice or will arrange for expert assistance to be provided by the European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO) in Heidelberg if local researchers have any doubts about the correct classification of a research project within the various criteria of the NIH guidelines. It is also available for general consultation and for the interpretation of the NIH guidelines. As Professor Arber stresses, the commission does not consider the NIH guidelines adopted in Switzerland as unalterable; it wants to keep a constant watch and make changes (even if these deviated from the NIH guidelines) if this was considered necessary.

When registering, researchers responsible for a project must announce their intentions and state the precautionary measures taken. "The committee considers the observance of these measures, registration and the provision of correct information to colleagues to be part of the duty of each and every researcher", the circular states. Research heads and heads of department at universities and other public and private institutions have been requested to support the commission's efforts.

The Swiss National Fund for the Promotion of Scientific Research particularly wants to promote the research in Switzerland. When it comes to the allocation of research funds, however, it insists on observance of the guidelines. The fund has mentioned the possibility of becoming involved in the establishment of a special safety (P4) laboratory. This project is expected to cost SF1.5 million.

The Swiss press has welcomed the guidelines, but there have been complaints that decisions concerning research with such far-reaching consequences should have been made in camera—the commission has no lay representatives, nor even experts from

W. GERMANY

Breeder hold-up

UNDER increasing pressure from environmental protectionists, the West German government has called a temporary halt to research and development on the fast breeder reactor. Last week, Dr Hans Matthöfer, the West German Minister for Science and Technology, announced that no more money was to be spent on R&D for the fast breeder until questions raised by the Social Democrats on the safety of fast breeder technology and the proliferation of nuclear weapons through the spread of plutonium had been considered by the Bundestag.

This means a bar on spending whatever has not yet been committed of the DM122 million set aside for fast breeder R&D under the government's medium term energy plan. Work already contracted, however, such as the prototype liquid metal fast breeder at Kalkar, will go ahead. It will be financed from that portion of the DM227 million fast breeder programme not devoted to research. Other projects unlikely to be axed are West Germany's collaboration in the construction of the French Superphénix and the fabrication plant for fast-breeder fuel elements which is already in operation.

Prior to the latest announcement discussion about the further development of breeder reactors in West Germany was becoming livelier. In the Social Democratic party above all there was increasing resistance to further financing of R&D work. The Ministry for Research and Technology had explained in detail to the Bundestag the pros and cons of the evolution of the fast breeder—it seems unsuccessfully.

Germany began development of the breeder in 1960—researchers got their early experience through participation in the construction of the American experimental reactor SEFOR. The 300 MW breeder at Kalkar is a German-Belgian-Dutch joint project due to be completed in 1982. Within the framework of the German-French agreement on Superphénix, Germany contributes 16% of the cost via electricity supply undertakings.

When the West German government presented its energy research programme at the end of April, Dr Matthöfer claimed that because of public resistance, his ministry had felt obliged not to balance the programme as much in favour of nuclear power as it had originally intended. It had been necessary to cut the target of 45,000 MW of nuclear power by 1985 to 30,000 MW. Nevertheless, the energy research programme puts greatest emphasis on nuclear power: out of the DM6,200 million to be spent on energy up to 1980, DM4,500 million was to go on nuclear energy. □

fields other than biology and medicine. The hope was expressed that parliamentarians would soon be roused: questions were put in parliament as early as two years ago; since then there has been silence on the subject.