

Radioactive waste

Sea-dumping in doldrums

BRITISH radioactive waste disposal practices are to be examined by a remarkable independent review body established jointly by the government and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). A four-man committee has been appointed to look into existing evidence on the safety and environmental implications of sea disposal, and the government has undertaken not to attempt further sea dumps until the committee has reported.

Both the government and TUC have been embarrassed by last year's decision by transport unions to prevent Britain's annual dump at a designated site in the North Atlantic — the government because the industrial action effectively thwarted the first programme of the newly established Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste Executive, and TUC because some of its constituent unions represent workers in the nuclear power industry. Recognizing common cause, government and unions have agreed that an independent review might resolve the issue.

At present, TUC says, it is opposed to the disposal of radioactive waste at sea, even for low-level material; it advocates land-based storage instead. Its chief complaint is that radioactive waste consultation procedures are "elitist" and keep the issue out of public view. But the unions' willingness to participate in a review of the question suggests that TUC may be open to persuasion.

Meanwhile, TUC has persuaded the government to accept on the new committee Mr Peter Taylor of the Political Ecology Research Group, an organization not noted for its sympathy to the nuclear industry. The government has countered by including on the committee Professor Brian Funnell of the University of East Anglia, a member of its own Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Group. The committee's chairman is Professor Fred Holliday, vice-chancellor of the University of Durham and a former chairman of the Nature Conservancy Council.

It might perhaps be questioned how much a four-man review can expect to achieve, especially since the Department of the Environment already has a large research programme investigating sea disposal options, including the emplacement of high-level wastes beneath the seabed, and the London Dumping Convention has a working group examining related questions. (The convention recently extended a moratorium on sea disposal until after next year's dumping season.) But Mr Taylor, for one, is undeterred, saying that existing models for dispersion of radionuclides at sea have been over-simplistic and that they fail to take into account the possible effects of lateral bottom currents and upwellings near land. He would also like to examine aesthetic attitudes to sea

dumping, whose importance is recognized by the International Commission on Radiological Protection but which have not so far featured in disposal assessments.

Tim Beardsley

Inaction on Med

MEDITERRANEAN beaches will remain polluted with heavy metals and untreated sewage at least for the time being, according to a decision taken by Mediterranean states last Friday, 13 April, in Athens, Greece.

It was a black day for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), whose nine-year cooperative exercise on measuring pollution around the Mediterranean coast has been essentially ignored by the states that commissioned it.

The Egyptian UNEP executive director, Mustafa K. Tolba, pleaded with the meeting seriously to consider adopting environmental quality criteria for mercury in Mediterranean seafood and for the microbiological quality of bathing beaches, shellfish and the shellfish-growing areas. Said Tolba "If action is not taken now, the Mediterranean people may doubt how seriously committed you are to safeguarding the future of their sea".

To be cynical, however, it seems clear that so long as the tourists keep coming, while the cost of cleaning up sewage and industrial outfalls (or closing beaches and fisheries) is estimated to be many thousands of millions of dollars, and while the economic crisis persists, the Mediterranean states will be slow to comply with the finding that pollution levels are already too high for health in certain areas.

Robert Walgate

Visa blocked

DR David Goldfarb, the Moscow Jewish biochemist, has had his visa for Israel cancelled on the eve of his departure and is now threatened with treason charges.

Although Dr Goldfarb had been told he could never leave the country since his work had brought him into contact with state secrets, the Academy of Science finally arranged his visa, apparently by appealing directly to the party central committee, bypassing the KGB. The academy scientists themselves felt threatened by the campaign of the military to have all sensitive areas of the life sciences classified as secret; they also wished to create an auspicious atmosphere before the meeting of the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS) in Moscow in June.

Last weekend, however, a KGB team went to Dr Goldfarb's apartment, confiscated his personal files and strain collection and told him he was under investigation for attempting to take to the West material of importance to national security. **Vera Rich**

US defence research

Pentagon climbs down on secrecy

Washington

THE quarrel between US universities and the Department of Defense (DoD) over proposed new restrictions on the publication of "sensitive" research may vanish as abruptly as it arose. At a meeting at the Pentagon last week, Dr Richard DeLauer, Under-Secretary of Defense for research and engineering, told a meeting of the DoD-University Forum that he did not favour a proposal developed by his own subordinate, Deputy Under-Secretary Dr Edith Martin, to create a new category of "sensitive" DoD-sponsored research that could not be published without DoD permission.

DeLauer's comments appeared to discomfit Dr Martin, who was present at the meeting, as much as it pleased the university representatives, led by Dr Donald Kennedy, president of Stanford University. Stanford is one of three universities concerned enough about the proposal to have written to DoD and to the White House science office warning that the proposal would prevent them from undertaking certain categories of research for DoD.

The contentious restrictions were part of an internal DoD report on the Pentagon's approach to international technology transfer. It said that DoD contracts for work that was both "applied" and "sensitive" should in future give the Pentagon the right to prevent publication of the resulting findings. Dr DeLauer, however, claimed to be mystified by the meaning of "sensitive" research. He said that the creation of such an ambiguous category would confuse DoD contract officers and was probably unnecessary; it would be better for DoD to rely on its existing powers of formal classification. That is what the universities said at a recent meeting of a forum subcommittee on export controls, only to be told by Dr Martin that it would be a mistake to adopt an "all or nothing" approach based on classification.

Meanwhile, both sides have good reason for patching up their differences as quickly as possible. DoD officials warned the universities last week that the 1985 bonanza proposed by President Reagan for DoD's basic research (about half of which ends up in the universities) was under fierce attack by the House of Representatives' armed services committee. Instead of growing by 6 per cent in real terms, as proposed in the president's budget, the budget could remain level or even decline by 2 per cent.

Dr DeLauer appealed to the universities to use their political influence to protect the budget proposals, saying that university presidents could do more to bend the ears of congressmen by inviting them to their campuses to "give them some gee-whizz and show-and-tell"

Peter David