

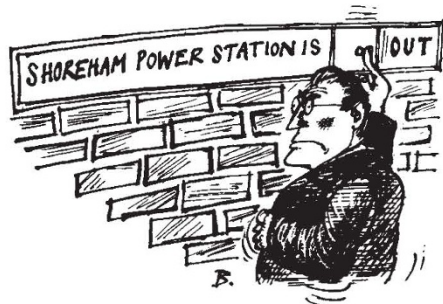
Risen phoenix bites dust again

Boston

NEW YORK'S Shoreham nuclear plant seems again to be heading for the scrap-heap. In a major surprise for all parties involved, New York Governor Mario Cuomo last week signed an agreement with the Long Island Lighting Company (LILCO) that would permanently close and dismantle the Shoreham nuclear power plant.

But even as the ink was drying on the new agreement, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) removed the last obstacle to issuing an operating licence for the Shoreham plant. While most observers believe that the shutdown agreement will hold even if Shoreham is now licensed, the timing of recent events can only increase the confusion about its future.

Announcing the new agreement last week, Cuomo said he expected the new plan to "end this matter once and for all". But the tangled history of negotiations to close Shoreham and the curious timing of



the NRC ruling has made local residents, investors and regulators doubtful that the end has really arrived.

A similar plan to shut the plant last spring fell through unexpectedly when the state legislature failed to endorse it. Furthermore, the new agreement comes just as the completed but never-licensed

EATING FOR HEALTH Diet in the United States

Washington

IF THE National Research Council's report on diet and health is not the final word on the subject, it is certainly the weightiest. The report, released last week, weighs nearly 6.5 pounds in a paper bound version. In addition to providing a thorough assessment of the health risks associated with various foods, there are dietary recommendations with a familiar ring: reduce total fat intake to 30 per cent or less of calories, eat five or more servings per day of fruits and vegetables, moderate protein consumption, limit salt consumption to 6 g per day or less. Implementing these and other recommendations is left to another panel now preparing a report due out in a year.

Joseph Palca

nuclear plant had begun to show signs of life (see *Nature* 338, 3; 2 March 1989).

In the shutdown agreement, the state of New York will purchase the \$5,500-million nuclear plant from the utility for \$1 and will also assume responsibility for decommissioning and dismantling it. The new agreement is almost identical with last year's plan, except that the closure does not now require the approval of the state legislature. Unlike the previous plan, the new agreement will also allow the State Public Service Commission to decide what are appropriate rate increases for LILCO's electricity consumers. Last year's abortive agreement included an explicit schedule of increases.

By signing the agreement, Cuomo has given point to his long-standing opposition to Shoreham. For this decisive action he has been applauded by many of those involved in the controversy, including utility representatives who have said repeatedly that prolonged uncertainty about the future of the plant would be the most costly and damaging outcome. But in his latest move, the governor has also left himself open to criticism and unpopularity from Long Island residents, who face increased electric prices and an expected two years of electricity shortages.

The Shoreham decommissioning agreement has been signed by both Cuomo and the president of LILCO, but it still needs the approval of LILCO's board of directors and shareholders, which is likely to be given. But the effect of the ruling by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is still unclear. NRC has disqualified New York State and Suffolk County from participating in the licensing process, effectively overriding state and local protests that the plan for evacuating the local population from the neighbourhood of the plant is inadequate. Cuomo called the ruling "absurd" and "academic", noting that the agreement to shut the plant had already been signed.

Even so, given the ups and downs of Shoreham so far, the loopholes in the closure agreement cannot be ignored. Most prominent among these is the likelihood that LILCO's outstanding application for an operating licence for Shoreham will be approved before April, when the state's Public Service Commission is required to settle the rate increases the utility will be allowed. If LILCO is not satisfied with them, it could conceivably renege on the agreement.

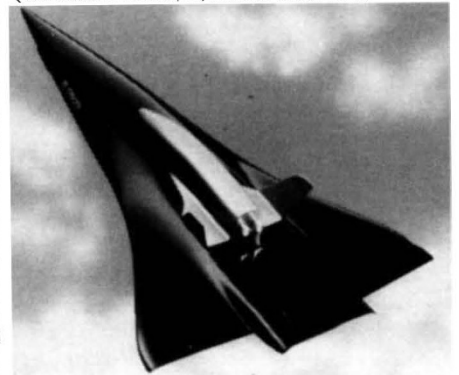
LILCO representatives nevertheless claim to be committed to the new agreement, and refuse to "speculate" about other possible developments. Yet for many observers of the controversy, Cuomo's new closure plan will be final only when a start has been made on dismantling the plant.

Seth Shulman

Full speed ahead with space plane

Munich

WEST German Research Minister Heinz Riesenhuber announced last week that West Germany will press ahead with the development of a space plane called Sanger (see *Nature* 338, 6; 2 March 1989).



The plane, named after German aerospace pioneer Eugen Sanger (1905–1964), would consist of two reusable parts: a booster stage resembling a conventional jumbo-jet would bring a smaller craft piggyback to an altitude of 30 km. The smaller plane would then fly at five times the speed of sound to its destination. Sanger could be used for passenger transport on Earth or as a space shuttle.

The Research Ministry plans to spend DM220 million on the project over four years, with the West German aerospace research agency DFVLR contributing an additional DM85 million and private industry DM2,530 million. Riesenhuber estimated that the cost of transporting a kilogram of payload into space could be reduced from the current \$8,000 to \$2,000 or even \$1,000.

Britain, France, Japan and the United States are currently working on space transporters of their own. Sanger, the British HOTOL or the French contribution might eventually be adopted by the European Space Agency as a successor to the Hermes shuttle currently being developed.

Steven Dickman

FRANCE

Hazard prevention

Paris

MICHEL Rocard, French prime minister, has set up a commission for the prevention of industrial and technological hazards. The aim of this new body, which is composed of twelve experts from potentially hazardous disciplines, ranging from biology to mining, is to reduce public anxiety as well as to prevent accidents involving dangerous substances. The government already has a Secretary of State for the Prevention of Major Technological and Natural Hazards as well as organizations for nuclear safety and an ethics committee with a wide-ranging remit.

Peter Coles