

NUCLEAR POWER

Wackersdorf to be buried

Munich

CONSTRUCTION of West Germany's controversial nuclear fuel reprocessing plant at Wackersdorf may have been rendered superfluous by a non-binding agreement, made public last week, that would allow West German fuel to be reprocessed at La Hague in Normandy. Following a meeting between West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterrand planned for this week, a sudden decision could be made to abandon the plant.

The agreement to reprocess West German nuclear fuel at La Hague was announced between the West German energy company VEBA AG and the French state-owned nuclear fuels company Cogema. It was the first time that Cogema had offered a West German company the chance to share ownership in its expanded reprocessing plant at La Hague. VEBA, which owns Preussen Elektra, the second-largest electric utility in West Germany, would take more than 49 per cent ownership of the third 'plutonium factory' (Usine Plutonium 3 or UP 3) at the Hague beginning in 1999. UP 3 is expected to be completed by 1991.

The agreement would provide for reprocessing of at least 400 tonnes of spent fuel a year (the amount used by Preussen Elektra plants). In addition, Cogema would also reprocess fuel used by all other plants in West Germany at "fair and reasonable prices", said VEBA spokesman Henrich Wilckens. The cost to VEBA is rumoured to be in the range of DM 2,500 million, roughly a third of what is needed to complete Wackersdorf.

West German utilities already have contracts with Cogema to reprocess fuel elements but they are expected to end in the mid-1990s, when Wackersdorf is planned to begin operation.

The decision to abandon Wackersdorf would be an about-face for Kohl's centre-right coalition government. Kohl has until now held fast to the 'national concept' of

breeding and reprocessing nuclear fuel, as well as storing nuclear waste, in West Germany.



Building the Wackersdorf plant has brought more than 1,600 jobs to the economically depressed region of Oberpfalz in northern Bavaria. Kohl expressed strong support for Wackersdorf as recently as last November.

The Kohl government, under fire from the Bavarian government, refused last week to be pinned down, saying only that a "new situation" has arisen. But political analysts see a golden opportunity for Kohl to rid himself of one of his heaviest political burdens and counter his waning popularity by burying Wackersdorf.

Bavaria has demanded compensation should the project be shelved. More than DM2,000 million has already been invested. So far, the Bavarians have rejected the suggestion that the plant be used as an intermediate or final storage site for nuclear waste.

Wackersdorf has been a rallying point for anti-nuclear demonstrators. More than 3,000 people have been tried in local courts in the four years since the decision to begin construction. German courts are still burdened with cases protesting at the construction on constitutional and other grounds (see *Nature* 333, 8; 1988).

By abandoning Wackersdorf, VEBA would save in court costs and in direct investment, which would allow electricity prices to be kept down while creating a better image for VEBA. And the international tie-up would also help to prepare for the creation of the European Single Market in 1993.

Nuclear power plant builders are already merging their operations. The West German and French nuclear power plant producers Kraftwerk Union (KWU) and Framatome announced last week the formation of a common subsidiary to be based in Paris. The new company 'Nuclear Power International,' will sell reactors to third countries.

Steven Dickman

OIL SPILL

Environmental effects still unclear

Berkeley

IN the third week following the wreck of the *Exxon Valdez* in Alaska's Prince William Sound, north-east winds carried much of the oil slick into the Gulf of Alaska where rough seas helped to break it up.

Jacqueline Michel, a biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, says that early fears that toxic hydrocarbons would dissolve in the water were not realized.

Analysis of water samples taken from the sound a week after the spill detected no aromatic hydrocarbons or volatile organic compounds. The first sample of plankton taken from one affected part of the sound seemed normal as well, says Michel.

Herring have begun spawning in the sound, but there is no indication of whether the fish or their eggs have been harmed by the spill. The 1,300 dead birds and 200 dead sea otters that have been recovered are only the tip of the iceberg, says Michel, and there is still concern that the oil will seriously affect the migratory seabirds that are just beginning to nest on islands in the path of the slick.

Marcia Barinaga

BLOOD PRODUCTS

All suspect in India

New Delhi

THE Indian government has ordered the withdrawal and destruction of all locally made blood products and banned their production until further notice. The director general of the health services has also appealed to all those who have used these products to report to the nearest government laboratory for testing for antibodies to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

The government action followed the recommendations of a committee set up in February following the chance discovery of HIV antibodies in samples of anti-rh immunoglobulin marketed by a Bombay company. The committee found that blood products manufactured by two other companies were also contaminated. Further investigation showed that all the nine companies in the country had been flouting rules regarding screening of donor blood for HIV. Their production technology was found incapable of ensuring inactivation of the virus.

The list of banned products includes 16 items made from blood and human placenta. The companies involved have been told that their licences will be suspended until they modify their production process. Until then, the entire demand for blood products will have to be met through imports. Imported products must be accompanied by certification showing them to be free of HIV and are subject to screening in India.

K.S. Jayaraman

SOVIET UNION

Forest ministry felled

London

THE government of the Uzbekistan Republic chose 1 April to announce the abolition of its Ministry of the Forestry Industry. This decision, the official communique stressed, was not an April Fool's Day joke, although the fact that such a ministry had ever been set up may have been. For Uzbekistan is 80 per cent desert and barren mountains, and the only woodland is located in a few national parks and reserves administered by the State Commission for Nature Conservation.

Vera Rich