



# Newsletter

## October 1995

### HINKLEY POINT IN COURT OVER BREAKING DISCHARGE RULES

Nuclear Electric is being taken to court for failing to comply with official authorisations for discharging radioactive materials from the Hinkley A Magnox site.

The company is due to appear before Bridgwater Magistrates on October 11. The summons alleges that Nuclear Electric breached the requirements of their authorisation "in that they failed to maintain and keep in good repair the system for discharging relevant waste gases."

The charge relates to defective pipework in the Iodine Absorption Plant discovered during an inspection by an official from the Pollution Inspectorate about a year ago. HMIP is bringing the prosecution under the 1993 Radioactive Substances Act.

The hearing was originally set take place in Bridgwater on 13 September but was adjourned after an application from Nuclear Electric.

NE was taken to court over Hinkley Point in 1992, when the company was fined £1000 with £2,500 costs for breaking its site license. On that occasion it had allowed the fuel supply to an emergency gas turbine to be switched off.

The court case also follows hard on the heels of the much-publicised prosecution of the company over an incident at the Wylfa Magnox station (see below).

## HINKLEY IN N-SCARE No 2

New court

NUCLEAR power checks faced a new safety alarm last night over alleged faults at a West

By Chris Riddell

to follow an inspection of the 10-year-old plant at Wylfa Magnox station, North Wales, which is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

### MASSIVE £250,000 FINE FOR WYLFA SAFETY BREACH

Nuclear Electric was fined £250,000 with costs of £138,000 at Mold Crown Court last month after pleading guilty to breaking safety rules at the Wylfa Magnox station on Anglesey, North Wales.

The case received widespread media attention after the prosecution barrister said on the opening day that there had been the possibility of a meltdown at the plant.

Dr. Sam Harbison, head of the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, also said in evidence that he was "particularly concerned about the blatant failure of Nuclear Electric's safety culture". It seems clear that the exceptionally large fine reflected the serious way the charges had been treated by the NII.

The incident which prompted the prosecution occurred in July 1993 when a metal grab at the end of the refuelling crane fell into a fuel channel. The operators discovered that the grab was missing at 7.20pm, but it took them a further eight hours to find out exactly what had happened. A remotely controlled camera revealed that the grab had got stuck in and damaged one of the fuel channels. However, it wasn't until *nine hours* after the original incident that the operators began to shut down the reactor. It was the failure to carry out this simple safety precaution which was the main reason for the charges against Nuclear Electric.

The meltdown allegation was based on the potential scenario if the broken grab had totally blocked a fuel channel. This would have stopped carbon dioxide cooling gas



from flowing through and removing heat from the radioactive uranium. If the temperature of the fuel had continued to rise, it could have eventually melted, potentially releasing radioactive gas into the reactor building.

NE countered this by saying that the channel was not totally blocked, because the grab (fortunately) damaged the graphite casing, allowing CO<sub>2</sub> to bypass the blockage. They also said that they were able anyway to monitor all the reactor's parameters and would have been well aware if the temperature was rising.

Nonetheless, the principle involved in the case was whether NE had taken proper notice of agreed safety procedures. In court, Dr. Harbison said that it was "irrelevant to argue with the benefit of hindsight about the

likelihood and potential scale of the release that might have occurred. What is important is that the operators were prepared to continue to operate the reactor for several hours without being able to know the exact coolant flow conditions in the core, running some chance that the fuel could be over-heating.

"In any event, if any action can be readily taken to avoid risk, it should be taken," he said. "I believe that throughout these events, the operators failed to adequately grasp the safety implications."

The other issue raised was about the commercial pressure to keep the plant running. One of the reasons why the company might have been so reluctant to shut down the reactor, it was suggested by Dr. Harbison, was because it would

## WYLFA NUCLEAR POWER STATION . . . HOW THE ACCIDENT HAPPENED

### THE TIMETABLE OF EVENTS

- ① July 31, 1995 4 pm - the electronic grab at Wylfa's number one reactor is busy changing the 6,150 fuel rods in the reactor's core. It does this constantly. Rods have a limited lifespan ranging over several months.
- ② 7.20 pm - Operators discover that the end of the grab is missing.
- ③ Operators investigate to see if the grab is in the refuelling machine, but can not find it.
- ④ 9.15 pm - Checks are made to confirm that the temperature of the core is not above normal.
- ⑤ More checks carried out with television cameras within the core. The grab is finally located at around 3.30 am on the morning of August 1st. It is lodged within the core.
- ⑥ 3.45 am - An operator at Wylfa telephones the National Grid to discuss the process of shutting the reactor down and asks what this will cost Nuclear Electric.
- ⑦ 4.31 am - Engineers begin a controlled shut-down of the reactor. This takes several hours.
- ⑧ The grab is recovered by a robotic arm over the next few days.

Anglesey station manager, Mike Williams

have lost money. This in itself was indicative of the new commercial environment encouraged in the run-up to privatisation of part of the industry.

The incident was seized on by opponents of privatisation as a foretaste of the "profit before safety" ethos which could engulf the nuclear community. Both the Labour Party and trade unions have come out strongly against privatising the seven AGRs and Sizewell B.

### SHE NEWS

#### NEW PLANNING APPROVALS FOR HINKLEY C BUILDINGS

West Somerset District Council has given approval for the construction of various ancillary buildings which would be necessary were Hinkley C to be built. The buildings include a fire station, electricity sub-station, stores and offices.

Earlier this year, the council approved detailed plans for a hostel to house up to 960 construction workers.

It was a condition of the 1990 consent for Hinkley C that the company should apply for these permissions before the autumn of this year. The fact that it has done so does not necessarily indicate that there is any revived enthusiasm for the overall plan. A Nuclear Electric spokesman told the *West Somerset Free Press* that it was keeping its options open.

The company is also still negotiating to buy or lease the extra land it will need to create a potential construction camp. However, it's suggested that the reason for this has more to do with making the new private company's balance sheet look better for prospective shareholders - by purchasing a tangible asset - than with wanting to progress Hinkley C.

#### COMBWICH WHARF DREDGING WORK

Combwich resident John Randall reports that work has been progressing since July on dredging the channel of the River Parrett in order to make Combwich wharf accessible for large load-carrying boats.

Nuclear Electric's current reason for this activity is because they might use the wharf to bring in a large replacement part for the turbine hall at Hinkley B. The reason for building a new road round the outside of the village to take traffic from the wharf, however, was originally the prospect of large parts being delivered for Hinkley C.

John says that the noise and smell from the work has disturbed local residents, and already broken rules agreed with the parish council.

#### RADIATION GUIDE

Steady progress is being made on production of the simple guide to radiation exposure mentioned in a previous newsletter. We are hoping to come up with the finished product in a couple of months or so.

#### NEW HINKLEY B COMPANY APPLIES FOR DISCHARGE AUTHORISATION

The shadow company which would run Hinkley B after privatisation, currently known as the AGR & PWR Company, has applied for new authorisations to discharge radioactive wastes.

The application (to the Pollution Inspectorate and Ministry of Agriculture) contains a list of the ways in which radioactive wastes are produced at Hinkley B, including direct discharges into the sea and transport of low level waste to Drigg, near Sellafeld. The new company is not asking for any increases in the amounts, but the applications do contain a section which attempts to "justify" the discharges.

Before the deadline for comments expired on October 2, SHE therefore submitted a letter pointing out a number of ways in which the company's response was inadequate. These include failure to consider properly the consequences of a serious accident at the power station. We also pointed out that if a new application was necessary for Hinkley B, the same rule should apply to Hinkley A in what would become a split site.

So far, Nuclear Electric has shown no sign that it intends to go through the discharge authorisation process on its older stations, arguing that these will stay in the same (state) hands. This reluctance is understandable, since the age and operational standards of the Magnoxes makes them much more open to criticism than the AGRs.

Meanwhile, a second process is about to start when the power stations to be privatised will also have to apply for new site licenses from the NII. It's clear that the government is keen that this process should be pushed through as fast as possible - despite concern from within the ranks of the NII itself - so that it can get on with finding investors in the "new" company next year.

*British Energy is now officially given as the eventual name for the new company, which will link both Scottish and English AGRs with Sizewell B. No mention, of course, of anything "nuclear".*

**SAFE ENERGY NEWS**

**BRITAIN'S FIRST SOLAR-POWERED HOUSE BUILT IN OXFORD**

The first house in Britain to get all its electricity from solar power has been built in Oxford.

The house, designed and now lived in by architect Susan Roafe and her children, has a large array of 48 photovoltaic panels built into

its south-facing roof. On bright sunny days, the system exports power into the national grid. When it's dull and cloudy, it imports. On balance, the panels will produce enough electricity during the year to supply all the family's electricity needs.

Alongside the photovoltaic cells there are more traditional solar panels which will heat all the household's hot water. The house itself has been built to very high energy conservation standards. There is even an electric car in the garage, also supplied from the solar roof.

Liz Roafe's solar roof cost about £25,000 to build. However, its economics would look more promising if she was paid more than 2.8p per unit for the power she exports to the national grid.

In Germany, state subsidies mean that solar powered houses are supported by a special rate for their exported electricity. This helps to cover the large capital cost of installing the systems. The result is that over 3,000 roofs in Germany now have solar-electric panels. And that's in a country that is less sunny than Britain!

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*Although at first classified as "below scale" in the International Nuclear Event Scale, the Wylfa event was eventually reclassified at Level 2 - "serious with potential safety consequences". There had previously been twelve other Level 2 incidents at Nuclear Electric sites since the system was introduced in 1989.*

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