

### A Nuclear Slush Fund?

The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) is a Government agency which began operation in April 2005. It took-over the ownership of all nuclear sites previously run by British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) and the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA). The NDA's objective is to "ensure the nuclear legacy is cleaned up safely, securely, cost effectively and in ways which protect the environment for the benefit of current and future generations". (1)

The Energy Act (2004), which established the NDA, also gave it responsibility to provide encouragement and other support to activities that benefit the social or economic life of communities living near its nuclear sites. (2)

With the NDA's focus firmly on cleaning up the nuclear legacy, and responsibility to work with other socio-economic development agencies to help protect communities affected by nuclear decommissioning, the organization began life with a reasonable level of support from both sides of the nuclear debate.

But now questions are being asked about how the NDA's nuclear largesse may be unfairly influencing communities in debates about volunteering to accept a nuclear waste disposal site, and even on whether or not to support new reactors.

There is increasing evidence that the NDA's 'social fund' is no longer supporting the laudable aim of helping communities suffering from the economic shock of nuclear closure but has instead become a 'slush fund' used to soften up communities and potentially "buy off" groups that could be opposed to nuclear power.

For example, the NDA has released information, in response to a Freedom of Information request from South Lakeland Friends of the Earth, showing that £34m has been given to hospitals, colleges, and wildlife and heritage groups since 2005. Cumbria County Council has a staffer sponsored by the NDA, as does Made in Cumbria, established to help businesses involved in the food and craft sectors. (3)

Money has been given to a lifeboat appeal, footpaths, and a harbour wall scheme. The Citizens Advice Bureau in Copeland (the part of Cumbria which includes the Sellafield nuclear facility) has received almost £80,000. In addition to the £34m, the NDA will be "investing" £10m over three years in the University of Cumbria. According to *The Guardian*, the NDA is spending taxpayers' money on "social" projects "as if Christmas has come early". (4)

All of this is perfectly legal, and some of it is admirable. When the NDA was set up, it was expected to establish a fund to be used to offset some of the worst impacts of nuclear decommissioning and the associated loss of jobs, and spending in communities where nuclear facilities were being cleaned up and closed down. But this laudable aim now appears to be getting distorted. The NDA's funding system is increasingly being perceived as providing sweeteners, rather than appropriate economic regeneration funding to help communities.

Apart from the University of Cumbria, money is going to other organisations which should be properly funded by central government - Cumbria's nine cottage hospitals

received £18m. (5) Money the NDA and other nuclear companies are disbursing in Cumbria is going to organizations that should be acting as impartial and vocal watchdogs on nuclear waste from current and future reactors.

Cumbria Wildlife Trust (CWT), for example, is sponsored by Studsvik UK Ltd, the Swedish nuclear company which is building a radioactive metal decontamination facility at Lillyhall, and is part of the consortium that now runs the low-level waste repository at Drigg. The Trust also receives funding from Sellafield Ltd. (6) CWT's work on the Biodiversity Action Plan was also part funded by Sellafield Ltd. (7)

Friends of the Lake District and the Lake District National Park Authority both work in partnership with Cumbria Vision on various projects such as the Lake District World Heritage Project, (8) and the Cumbrian Biodiversity Action Plan. Cumbria Vision is the main economic development agency in the County, and is promoting the West Cumbria Energy Coast Masterplan, which received £250,000 from the NDA.

The plan includes the promotion of a new nuclear power station at Sellafield. (9) Cumbria Wildlife Trust and the Lake District National Park Authority are partners in Cumbria Vision. And Cumbria Vision is listed as a sponsor of the "Wildlife in Cumbria" an initiative by over twenty local organizations to promote Cumbria as Britain's "best-kept wildlife secret". (10)

Finally, the NDA, Nukem Ltd and Sellafield Ltd are all listed as donors to the Cumbria Community Foundation which disburses funds to charities all over Cumbria. The Foundation also manages the Sellafield Site Fund and the Fluor Cumbria Fund. (11)

Had the NDA's focus remained firmly on decommissioning old nuclear facilities and cleaning up the nuclear legacy, its funding of local projects and institutions might have been accepted as necessary protection for communities affected by nuclear closures.

But now the NDA's remit has widened to include developing a nuclear waste repository, and the Government has given the go-ahead to a new generation of reactors (12) - adding to the UK's nuclear waste stockpile, questions are being asked about the ethics of some of the funding. It would be a brave heritage centre, school or library which, having received substantial monies from the NDA, then allowed, for example, an exhibition on the impacts of uranium mining, says Marianne Birkby of South Lakeland Friends of the Earth. (13)

The Government has asked communities to volunteer to host a nuclear dump. (14) Communities that volunteer and make it onto a shortlist of sites can expect generous "community benefit packages", described by opponents of nuclear dumping as "bribes". (15) The Government's nuclear waste White Paper lists several "investments" that a community might benefit from if it agreed to host a geological disposal facility. These might include improved local training and education investment; improved public services, infrastructure, housing, recreational facilities; improved transport infrastructure; better local healthcare and so on. (16)

The Lake District National Park Authority has said it will “work with partners” on any proposed underground nuclear waste repository. At a national park meeting in April 2008 the authority had before it a request to “Object to any further disposal of radioactive waste in Cumbria.” But it rejected the option and instead agreed that “if West Cumbria is identified as one of the parts of the UK suitable for the disposal of radioactive waste, we will work with partners to ensure that the best solution for Cumbria and the rest of the country is achieved. Any solution should not adversely affect the National Park.” (17) In a consultation exercise by the Authority in 2006, the most favoured option was to work with partners to ensure the best solution for Cumbria.

At the time of the inquiry in 1995 into plans by the nuclear waste disposal agency at the time -Nirex (now absorbed into the NDA) to build a Rock Characterisation Facility (RCF) at Sellafield, the authority took the view that, not only should major developments such as the RCF not be sited within national parks, but they should not be sited just outside the boundary of the park either. The harmful impact of the RCF on the National Park would have been significant and would have a damaging effect on the special character and qualities of this western part of the Lake District, and the setting of the National Park. (17)

The National Park Authority now appears to have accepted that the likelihood of West Cumbria being put forward as a potential volunteer site is very high, and that it is important to be involved in decision-making. The Authority also notes that “...the host community will potentially receive a community benefits package which could have enormous economic and social advantages for the area, as would the jobs involved with the development / construction and operation of the facility.”

Martin Forwood of Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment encapsulates local concern on the about turn by the National Park Authority. He says: “Many people inside and outside the National Park will accept nothing less than strong and independent leadership from the authority and will expect such an organisation to remain true to its principles”.

But given the amount of nuclear money pouring into Cumbria, this may not be possible.

## References

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