



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

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NFLA media release - for immediate release, 6th September 2016

“Sellafield: a nuclear site struggling to deal with the basics” - NFLA calls for regulator, Government and Parliamentary inquiry into whistleblower allegations

The Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) calls today for the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR), the Government and Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) and the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee to investigate the shocking claims made by a high-level ‘whistleblower’ at the Sellafield site in last night’s BBC ‘Panorama’ documentary. (1) NFLA also publishes today an overview of the wider issues of Sellafield reprocessing provided by independent radiation consultant, Dr Ian Fairlie.

Amidst the serious allegations made in the documentary include:

- ‘Panorama’ found parts of the Sellafield site regularly have too few staff to operate them safely. During one quarter there was **19 times** that such issues occurred. Meg Hillier MP, who chairs the Public Accounts Committee was shocked by the figures and said in the documentary: **“It is incredible. It defies belief actually that anything could be working at below safe staffing levels. There is no excuse.”**
- Radioactive materials like uranium and plutonium have been stored in degrading plastic bottles in cupboards for a number of years. Only now are they beginning to be dealt with.
- The whistle-blower (a former senior manager at Sellafield) said his biggest fear was a fire in one of the nuclear waste silos or one of the reprocessing plants, saying: **“If there is a fire there it could generate a plume of radiological waste that will go across Western Europe.”**
- Parts of the site are “dangerously run down” and officials from its former managing company Nuclear Management Partners raised concerns some sites could collapse over time, creating a potential environmental catastrophe and a dangerous radioactive release.
- The full cost of decommissioning Sellafield could be as high as **£162 billion** and take over a century to undertake.

NFLA have consistently raised similar concerns over the past 20 years (2), and it is not particularly surprised with some of them. However, the comments made by the whistleblower and by former senior officials at Sellafield within the documentary emphasise the urgency of the problem, the decrepit nature of much of the facility and the intolerable risk it continues to pose to the public, not just in Cumbria but across the north of England, across the Irish Sea, and even the whole of Western Europe.

NFLA share the concerns of the local campaigning group CORE that, whilst many of the issues raised by ‘Panorama’ may relate to the ‘bad old days’, the blame still remains with the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and their inability, despite billions of pounds of taxpayer money, to rectify what the documentary called even the most ‘basic mistakes’.

As CORE said: “Many of the failures are inexcusable – under-staffing as just one example – and the complacent and somewhat cavalier explanations offered to Panorama by Sellafield, NDA and ONR will have swayed few viewers and will do nothing to boost public confidence in the safety of the site.” (3)

NFLA praises the courage of the whistleblower and for the BBC to show such a programme, given their paucity of critical coverage on the nuclear industry in recent years. NFLA note there has been some recent improvements at the site, but these are still completely inadequate in comparison to the

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level of intolerable risk and the amount of hazards on site. Issues like staff shortage are particularly unacceptable given the huge £1 billion+ annual budget the facility receives. It really is time for more openness and transparency in the operation of the Sellafield site. Just last week the new Minister for Energy Baroness Neville-Rolfe praised the Sellafield site after visiting it. NFLA hopes she and other ministers have now watched the 'Panorama' documentary and instead of nice platitudes get down to putting the appropriate measures in place to ensure the NDA does its job properly.

NFLA will send to the Government the latest analysis on Sellafield by Dr Fairlie, which widens the concerns of the NFLA to the reprocessing facilities on the site. Dr Fairlie's report concludes: "Most of all, we should recognize that, over the past 60 years (UK) nuclear policies, in both weapons and energy, have poorly served the nation." (4)

Sellafield lies at the heart of why NFLA remains concerned over the development of nuclear power and new reactors generating more nuclear waste. It is why the current Government review on Hinkley Point should lead to cancellation of the project. The Government should rather move to safer, clean energy alternatives like renewable energy. Furthermore, the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office should resume its close scrutiny of the Sellafield site and the Office for Nuclear Regulation should continue the ongoing tight regulation of the site, and explain how some of the serious allegations made in the documentary have been allowed to occur.

NFLA Chair Councillor Ernie Galsworthy said:

"The allegations made by this courageous former high level manager at Sellafield in the BBC 'Panorama' programme are serious, safety-critical and alarming to say the least. They show that, despite some limited improvements, there are huge problems in resolving the most dangerous nuclear facility in the world. I call on the Government to stop making nice platitudes about Sellafield and find out why these allegations made by the whistleblower are continuing to occur. The problems at Sellafield remains a key reason why the UK should not embrace new nuclear but rather concentrate its attention on resolving our nuclear legacy and moving towards safer renewable energy alternatives."

NFLA All Ireland Forum Co Chair Councillor Mark Dearey adds:

"The BBC Panorama documentary on Sellafield highlights yet again why this hazardous site some hundred miles from the Irish coastline remains of such alarm to Irish Councils. I call on Charlie Flanagan to immediately contact its UK counterpart and demand the issues raised by the Sellafield whistleblower are dealt with urgently. He should also ask the Irish Radiological Protection Institute to review its risk assessment of an incident at Sellafield. A fire in the reprocessing facilities could endanger much of Western Europe. That is why such facilities must be closed down and the priority become completely with the safe management and decommissioning of the entire Sellafield site."

Ends. For more information please contact Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary, on 0161 234 3244.

Notes for editors:

- (1) BBC Panorama, 5th September 2016
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b07v80s4/panorama-sellafields-nuclear-safety-failings>
- (2) See, for example, a report by the NFLA SC Policy Advisor Pete Roche for Friends of the Earth Cumbria, 'Towards a Safer Cumbria: How government, regulators and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority have neglected nuclear waste in Cumbria', March 2013
[http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/radwaste/Towards_a_Safer_Cumbria\(March2013\).pdf](http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/radwaste/Towards_a_Safer_Cumbria(March2013).pdf)

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- (3) Provided to the NFLA Secretariat by CORE Cumbria and will be on its website shortly – <http://corecumbria.co.uk>
- (4) NFLA Radioactive Waste Policy Briefing 65, 'The Nonsense of Nuclear Fuel Reprocessing' by Dr Ian Fairlie, 6th September 2016, is attached with this media release and will be placed on the homepage of the NFLA website <http://www.nuclearpolicy.info>.

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