E&E NEWS

NRC chair defends cleanup plan to skeptical Democrats

By Jeremy Dillon

12/02/2021 06:40 AM EST

Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chair Chris Hanson yesterday defended his agency's role in the cleanup of shuttered power plants after a barrage of criticism from Senate Democrats who called for more public input.

The NRC proposed a rule last month to address plant decommissioning. The goal is to reflect the decreased risk of a reactor that no longer has fuel.

But Democrats say the rule wouldn't give states and communities enough input on nuclear plant closures. They also say the NRC would be giving up too much oversight (*E&E Daily*, Nov. 5).

"Our independent nuclear safety regulator would serve as a glorified filing cabinet, ceding the job of regulator to the nuclear industry itself," said Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), who chairs the Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Clean Air, Climate and Nuclear Safety.

Current rules require the NRC to make case-by-case decisions on whether to waive certain requirements for reactors that have entered decommissioning. Exemption requests could alter security procedures or reduce the area needing emergency planning.

"Our decommissioning processes are oriented around one primary goal, and that is ultimately green-field release of the site," Hanson told lawmakers.

Hanson also said public comment already exists for decommissioning. Site operators must file a report with the NRC outlining cleanup plans. The federal agency then sets up hearings on the plan.

"If that report comes to us and it is lacking in anyway, we can direct our licensees to address those deficiencies and prohibit undertaking any decommissioning activities until those deficiencies are addressed," Hanson said.

Still, critics say the public comment process doesn't do enough to give states and communities enough say, and the NRC proposed rule would leave the system in place. It's why Commissioner Jeff Baran voted against the proposed rule (*E&E News PM*, Nov. 3).

Sweden approves nuclear waste storage site

Sweden follows Finland in deciding to build a facility to store spent nuclear fuel.



Permission had been granted to build a facility to package and store spent nuclear fuel at a coastal site near the Forsmark nuclear power plant | Fredrik Sandberg/AFP via Getty Images

BY CHARLIE DUXBURY

January 27, 2022 | 7:58 pm

STOCKHOLM — After decades of prevarication, Sweden on Thursday decided on a final storage plan for its nuclear waste, becoming only the second country in the world after Finland to take such a step.

Environment Minister Annika Strandhäll told a news conference that permission had been granted to build a facility to package and store spent nuclear fuel at a coastal site near the Forsmark nuclear power plant, about an hour's drive north of the capital.

"It has been a long process to get to where we now stand," Strandhäll said. "This has been one of the most closely examined issues the government has ever looked at."

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The decision is significant because it confirms Sweden's position as a global leader in the storage of nuclear waste. Finland is the only other country to decide on such a plan and is building a storage facility at Olkiluoto, across the Gulf of Bothnia from Forsmark. Like the Forsmark project, the Finnish plan was based on a process developed by Swedish researchers.

The method — referred to as KBS3 — will see the spent nuclear fuel stored in copper containers surrounded by bentonite clay and placed in 500 tunnels that will be 500 meters under the ground. The aim is to keep the radioactive waste isolated for at least 100,000 years.

"The method has been researched for a long time," Strandhäll said. "It has been carefully developed and well prepared."

But there has been criticism of the KBS3 method over recent years, including by researchers who have suggested that copper may not be as resistant to corrosion as the method assumes, meaning the risk of leaks could be higher than expected.

Strandhäll said the relevant authority — the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority — had judged the method safe.

The approval of the Forsmark site is a big step forward in a long-running saga.

Since the 1970s, Swedish authorities — like their counterparts in nuclear-power-dependent states the world over — have been seeking a solution for the final storage of nuclear waste, scouring the country for suitable sites while also tasking researchers to develop safe methods.

But it took until 2011 for an application to be made by the company SKB — a

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nuclear waste manager owned by Swedish nuclear power producers — for planning permission at Forsmark.

Since then, lengthy consultations have been held with interested parties, from scientists to residents in Östhammar municipality where Forsmark is located.

Late last year, the process became more politically divisive when two opposition parties pushed the government to make a decision on the SKB application and threatened Strandhäll with a no-confidence vote if she didn't comply.

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"Today we have the knowledge and technology which means we don't need to pass this responsibility onto our children and grandchildren," she said. "This is a responsibility the government needs to take now."

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