## Do shared repositories

In the February 2004 issue of NEI, Chris Murray, managing director of Nirex, set out the approach that Nirex is taking in dealing with the UK's radioactive waste legacy. Although the focus of the article was on how Nirex is attempting to tackle the problem using an ethical approach, it also criticised the concept of international waste repositories – this part of the article is reproduced in the Panel on page 12. The comments have prompted a letter from Charles McCombie and Neil Chapman of Arius, which is reproduced below. Murray's response to this letter is also on page 12.

In the February 2004 issue of NEI, the head of UK Nirex, Chris Murray, criticises strongly the concept of shared multinational or regional repositories. Murray's criticisms parallel the strident attack made in his name by a Nirex representative in a panel discussion at the Waste Management 2004 Meeting in February in Tucson, Arizona. The tenor of the audience responses to the panel discussion On behalf of the numerous countries that are seriously considering multinational disposal as a possible option, we should like to made it clear that the extreme views put forward by Nirex were not widely shared. express the frustration that is engendered by irresponsible comments such as those made by Murray. If nuclear power is to continue supplying much needed energy on a global scale, then safe and secure disposal solutions are needed for all countries producing radioactive wastes. For some small countries, this will be possible only with shared repositories. Both regionally and globally, these will complement wastes. For some sman countries, and win be possible only with shared repositories. Both regionally and globally, these win compensation the national repositories of larger nations. It does a gross disservice to the nuclear community's efforts to make clear to the public the global environmental benefits of geological disposal when unwarranted attacks are made on either national or shared solutions. In a paragraph titled 'international dumping', Murray refers disparagingly to plans for shared repositories. This terminology is pre-Responsible mutual support by followers of both disposal strategies is required. sumably founded on his implicit assumption that multinational repositories will be of a lower technical standard then national facilities. In fact, all responsible initiatives for shared disposal are based upon the implementation of state-of-the art repositories just like those Professionals in the disposal field have spent years resisting the media usage of the pejorative description 'dumping' to describe the high-tech geological repository concepts that are being developed worldwide. Given the difficulties that the nuclear industry has had to envisioned in the major national programmes. establish confidence in the ethical, scientific and technical basis of geological disposal, it is disappointing to see such language being used The principal arguments put forward by Nirex in *NEI* and at Tucson against multinational repositories are: by the head of a national programme. They are 'unethical', since each country using nuclear technologies should dispose of wastes on its own territory. Shared repository initiatives are 'academic', because there are currently no specific host countries identified. Multinational projects cannot work because they are not welcomed by local communities. Murray gives no justification for his view that freely agreed transfer of radioactive wastes between willing sovereign states (as would be required in all responsible multinational initiatives) should be regarded as unethical. This is certainly not the view of the numerous countries considering the option, nor of international organisations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Eurocommunes considering the option, not or international organisations international Atomic Energy Agency (ALA) and the Enter pean Commission (EC), both of which are on record as recognising that such transfers are not only ethical but also environmentally beneficial, if they make safe and secure disposal available to all countries. Today, wastes are already being transferred between counuenencial, it usey make sale and secure usposal available to an countries. Totay, wastes are aneady being transferred between countries tries where this results in environmental improvements or security gains (for example: research reactor fuel from various countries is returned to the USA; and Belgium accepts the small quantities of radioactive wastes from its smaller neighbour, Luxembourg). What certainly is unethical is for major nuclear nations to try to impose upon small countries their own lopsided interpretation of ethics. The large nuclear nations were happy to export nuclear fuel cycle products and services (including reactors, fuel fabrication, reprocessing and so on) to any who would purchase these. To single out disposal as the one part of the nuclear fuel cycle that may not be internationalised is self-serving and inconsistent. The Nirex arguments for national nuclear self sufficiency ring rather hollow in a country that depends upon imported uranium and thus avoids all problems associated with mining – the fuel cycle step that has the most The Nirex attack on the ethics of multinational repositories is out of step with a wide body of international opinion. Why a struggling environmental impact.

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## Response by Chris Murray

Charles McCombie and Neil Chapman make several claims in response to my article in February's issue and the comments made by Nirex at Tucson. It is perhaps best to start with the most misleading McCombie accuses me of labelling plans for international repositories as 'international dumping' when even the most cursory reading of my article shows that I was referring to fears expressed by local communities concerning the acceptance of foreign waste; fears

Contrary to the incorrect assertion in the letter, this has nothing to do with the low technical stan-McCombie dismisses far too readily. dard or otherwise of an international repository but everything to do with respecting and responding to the concerns of those most affected by a repository, the community living around it. Claims that these concerns are voiced only by those who oppose geological disposal per se are demonstrably untrue – communities in Finland and Sweden have insisted that no foreign waste is accepted while accepting the potential for a repository in their area – and to dismiss them as 'unwarranted' does nothing to address them. Experience, both in the UK and abroad, has shown that public opinion is a powerful force, no matter how often scientists or experts decry it as wrong-headed. The one time that the idea of an international repository has been put to the test of public opin-

ion, in Australia with the Pangea project, it was comprehensively rejected. Closer to home, the most recent Eurobarometer opinion survey to ask specifically about accepting foreign waste (Eurobarometer 50.00, 1999) found that just 12% of people supported the idea of disposing of foreign waste in their own country. To quote the involvement of some national waste organisations in the Sapierr project as evidence that this situation can be turned around suggests that the public acceptance lessons of the commercially-driven Pangea have not been learned. In fact the assertion by McCombie in his final paragraph that there is a need "to accept that these (international repositories) will *inevitably* be implemented in the future" (my italics) confirms this to be the case. On the question of ethics, McCombie accuses us of attempting to 'impose' our own judgement

on small countries and contends that there is something 'self-serving' in attempts to stop waste being transferred between countries. The argument goes that if major nuclear nations were happy to export goods and services at the front end of the fuel cycle, why not at the back end. This ignores several facts, not least of which is that those countries receiving reactors or fuel were receiving something useable and useful, rather than useless and potentially dangerous radioactive waste. There is a world of difference between importing and exporting a product rather than a problem. In addition it goes unrecognised in McCombie's letter that it is not a stark, zero-sum choice between constructing international repositories and abandoning smaller nuclear nations to their fate. Expertise, help, know-how, technology, political experience, knowledge and even personnel and funding can be 'exported' to smaller nations, all without breaching the principle of self-

sufficiency or overriding the concerns of local host communities. Finally, McCombie worries that Nirex is 'expending effort' and our 'limited resources' on

attacking a "concept that has no direct bearing" on our remit and interest. We do not agree; to say that talk of international repositories has no impact on national programmes is short-sighted and runs counter to the facts. The evidence from virtually every national programme is that continued talk of shifting waste across borders serves only to fuel fears and impede progress. Furthermore, the debates over national and international repositories share many of the same parameters and issues – most notably the ethical and social dimensions – and we will continue to play our legitimate part in these debates. At the same time, we will do all we can to convince

others to play their part, something I hope McCombie will also do. Chris Murray, Nirex, Curie Avenue, Harwell, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 0RD, UK

## International dumping

Another reoccurring theme, articulated to us in almost every country we deal with, is that of international repositories. Contacts nationally and internationally have repeatedly and unequivocally made it clear that the idea of international repositories is strongly opposed at a local level in any country where it is raised. For example, the Finnish community that voted to accept the development of a national repository in their community made it a condition of acceptance that no international waste would be accepted into the repository. A similar fear of 'international dumping' has been expressed in Canada, Sweden, France and the UK.

Proposals for international repositories cause major difficulties for national programmes and we at Nirex believe that each country should face up to dealing with its own waste. Our analysis of the views of local communities on this issue is that the siting of an international repository will be politically unacceptable (as well as near-impossible to implement) in a democratic state and unethical if an international repository were sited in an undemocratic state. There is also the basic point that a state which has had the benefit of nuclear technology must face up to the social and political issues associated with its programme, as well as the purely technical ones. Chris Murray in NEI February 2004

Group photograph taken at the Sapierr and Arius meetings that were held back-to-back in Piestany, Slovakia in February. Charles McCombie is pictured third from left, and Neil Chapman eighth from left

