



Covra, a nuclear waste storage facility in Holland. The UAE is considering the possibility of a shared nuclear waste storage site.

## UAE weighs options for nuclear waste disposal

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The UAE is weighing options for the long-term storage of nuclear waste from the country's proposed US\$20 billion (Dh73.45bn) nuclear power plant.

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One option under discussion is an underground cave to be shared with other nations from the region that could hold radioactive uranium and plutonium for thousands of years.

"We are talking about a long-term geological repository," said Hamad al Kaabi, the UAE's permanent representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the nuclear watchdog in Vienna. "Among GCC countries there is potential for a lot of co-operation in this area, including waste management and waste disposal."

The UAE has not yet held formal talks with other Gulf nations on investing in a shared storage site, but there could be room for negotiation ahead as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait lay the groundwork for their own civil nuclear programmes.

Officials from the Saudi electricity authority, Jordan's nuclear commission and other agencies are scheduled to meet in Dubai today for a conference on nuclear power in the region.

The UAE and its neighbours regard nuclear power as a way to meet rising electricity demand while reducing reliance on polluting fossil fuels. But the disaster at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi power plant following the earthquake and tsunami in March has made it more pressing for new nuclear nations to lay out plans for waste disposal - a question that not even some experienced nuclear nations have answered.

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Although scientists have recommended carving out underground caverns for nuclear waste since the 1950s, the high cost of such facilities and protests against radioactive waste sites have slowed progress. Finland and Sweden are on track to build waste sites only after extensive campaigns to win public support.

America's planned site in Yucca Mountain, Nevada, has been abandoned since last month, when Congress cut funding for the project from the federal budget. To date there is no large-scale geological depository anywhere in the world for nuclear waste.

Pooling funds to build such a facility is the logical choice for small nations without large volumes of nuclear waste, said Dr Ewoud Verhoef, the deputy director of the Dutch Central Organisation for Radioactive Waste, that nation's agency in charge of nuclear disposal.

"It's just easier if you can do it with your neighbour than with your faraway cousin," said Dr Verhoef, who also serves on the Arius Association, a group based in Switzerland that is studying the potential for shared repositories in Europe, South East Asia and the Gulf region.

Such a site could not be hosted in the Emirates because of a law preventing the storage of nuclear waste from other nations. But it would be in the UAE's interest to ensure its neighbours, should they formally embark on civil nuclear programmes, have long-term storage options, said Dr Charles McCombie, the executive director of Arius. He estimated that a shared repository would cost more than €4 billion (Dh21.03bn) but would offer a large payback in the form of regional security.

"The whole Gulf area becomes a more safe and more secure place if everyone has access to a deep geological depository," said Dr McCombie. "A scenario in which the UAE has a large nuclear programme and its own nuclear repository, and countries around like Qatar and Bahrain have nuclear power but no repository and spent fuel on the surface - that's not a comfortable scenario for many people."


The UAE has more than 70 years, at the earliest, before a long-term geological depository would be needed, according to Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (Enec), the government-owned company in charge of building and operating the reactors.

The company is researching options to extend that date, such as concrete-encased barrels that could store radioactive waste outdoors for centuries. Licences exist today only for casks that store waste for a maximum of several decades, but Enec is banking on future progress.

"It gives us the luxury to wait for the best technical solutions to come for your real, real disposal," said Dr Ausaf Husain, Enec's fuel management director. "Better solutions will have come, and we'll have the luxury to pick the best one."

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