

HSE to speed up licensing of new nuclear reactors

It's full steam ahead in Britain and Ontario as well as now in the USA

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A new generation of nuclear reactors could receive approval in about half the time it took to gain consent for Sizewell B, the last nuclear station to be built in Britain, according to government safety experts.

In a submission to the energy review to be published today, the Health & Safety Executive said that the process of licensing a new series of nuclear stations could take three to four years. This compares with the six and a half years it took to gain a licence for Sizewell B, the pressurised water reactor on the Suffolk coast which opened in 1995 after a mammoth public inquiry.

The HSE's findings are likely to hearten the Prime Minister and the nuclear industry, which has argued that a streamlined and speedier licensing regime is essential if new nuclear stations are to be built in the UK.

Tony Blair is expected to give the go-ahead for a programme of up to 10 new reactors when the review is published next month.

The old Central Electricity Generating Board applied for a licence to build Sizewell B in January 1981 but it was not finally granted until June 1987, and it then took a further eight years to construct the station.

The HSE's submission says that any new nuclear station would be subject to a two-stage vetting process. The first phase, to approve the generic design of the reactor, would take about three years. The second phase, to license the actual site for the station, would take a further six to 12 months.

The safety body stressed that its timings were dependent on the quality of the design put forward and an assumption that it would be an evolution from reactor technologies with which the HSE was already familiar.

The speed of the licensing process would also crucially depend on the agency being able to recruit appropriately qualified and experienced staff to carry out the assessment.

A spokesman said that the staffing of its Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, which stands at 162, would need to be increased by about 20.

The submission suggests that the licensing process could be helped by factoring-in work done on reactor designs by licensing authorities elsewhere in the world and even bringing in staff from overseas nuclear regulators and international organisations. However, the spokesman stressed that it would never be the case that the RE would simply rubber-stamp an approval already given to a reactor design by another inspectorate.

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