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DISPOSAL OF RADIOACTIVE WASTE:

NUCLEAR ENERGY AGENCY TO SPONSOR A NEW PHASE OF AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

Agreement has been reached by seven Member countries of the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) to continue research at the Stripa Mine in central Sweden into the safe disposal of radioactive waste. Phase 3 of the International Stripa Project will run until 1991 and will again be managed by the Swedish Nuclear Fuel and Waste Management Company (SKB) under the auspices of the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency. It will involve around one hundred scientists in a programme costing 112 million Swedish crowns (about $18 m).

Research has been carried out at the Stripa Mine (a former iron-ore mine) since 1976. Phase 1 of the International Stripa Project began in 1980 and Phase 2 started in 1983. The main aim was to develop techniques to assess the geology, hydrology and hydrogeochemistry of potential sites for the disposal of radioactive waste, as well as to perform tests to examine groundwater flow within fractured rock and assess properties of a backfilling and sealing material.

Canada, Finland, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States will contribute funding for the Phase 3 programme, building on the results of research under Phases 1 and 2. Phase 3 will be the final phase of the Stripa Project. The main area of study is designed to investigate groundwater flow characteristics in an unexplored volume of granite some 350 metres below ground using techniques mostly developed under Phases 1 and 2. Radar, seismic and hydraulic measurement will be used to test our ability to predict flow within fractured crystalline rock. This is of major importance when the selection of candidate sites for disposal is made.

A second area of study concerns the evaluation of alternative materials for use in sealing any fractures found in the vicinity of an engineered repository.

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The third area of study involves specific investigations of importance in establishing the technical feasibility of deep disposal systems. For example, a series of in situ tests will be carried out on the characterisation of water flow in rock fractures.

The Stripa Project does not involve the use of radioactive material, nor is it intended to dispose of any radioactive waste in the Stripa Mine. The techniques developed and expertise gained will provide the basis for detailed site investigations to be carried out in most OECD countries at potential sites for safe disposal of radioactive waste.

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