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US to be nuclear dumping ground

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THE US will become Australia's nuclear dumping ground in a remarkable 10-year agreement that takes the pressure off the Howard Government to find a domestic waste site.

The agreement to take spent fuel rods from the proposed new Lucas Heights reactor in Sydney was sealed at ministerial level late last year following talks between the US Department of Energy and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation.

The deal was revealed yesterday in a letter from ANSTO released by the country's nuclear watchdog, the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency.

This removes the last major obstacle to the approval of a replacement nuclear reactor at the Lucas Heights facility and eases the pressure on Canberra to resolve the dump issue.

The question of where to store the nation's nuclear waste became a federal election issue last October after John Howard backed away from a plan to force a repository on South Australia.

The two added fuel to environmental arguments that the federal Government had failed to make progress in finding a dump location – a condition for the granting of an operating licence for the new reactor.

The commonwealth generates more than 90 per cent of the nation's nuclear waste, and more than 80 per cent of this is now stored at Lucas Heights.

ANSTO spokesman Steve McIntosh yesterday hailed the US agreement as a coup for Australia.

"We have always viewed the spent fuel question as the biggest hurdle we had to jump and that seems to be out of the way," Mr McIntosh said.

ARPANSA chief John Loy is expected to decide within 12 months whether to approve the new reactor's operating licence. Yesterday he said the agreement was an "important new development which I will take into account in my considerations on the licence".

A spokesman for federal Science Minister Brendan Nelson refused to comment on the dump issue, saying only that the Government was "committed to ensuring the Australian research community had access to world-class facilities".

The agreement has not impressed the NSW Government, which yesterday reiterated its opposition to the storage and transport of nuclear waste through the state.

The US decision represents a special exemption for Australia, in part to reward ANSTO for

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helping develop a low-enriched uranium fuel capable of producing radio-pharmaceuticals but not open to potential abuse.

The US already accepts spent fuel containing uranium previously enriched in the US from 41 countries, including Australia, to reduce the risk that residual uranium will be used for nuclear weapons.

But the proposed Lucas Heights replacement research reactor will use low-enriched uranium fuel which does not come under this agreement and is not easily reprocessed.

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