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Government admits to mistakes in dealing with nuclear waste dump



The German government has admitted to mistakes in its handling of the controversial derelict nuclear waste dump in Asse. It also called on energy companies to share the cost of shutting it down.

Asse has been considered unsafe for years

Research Minister Annette Schavan admitted Thursday the use of the former salt mine would no longer be acceptable by today's technological standards, but she denied that she had not done enough about the problems that Asse has been causing.

Asse, close to the town of Wolfenbuettel in the state of Lower Saxony, has been declared unstable and is due to be closed, but it is not yet clear what is to be done with the nuclear waste that is still in it.



Anti-nuclear protests were particularly vehement last year

Speaking before an investigative committee of the Lower Saxony parliament, Schavan also admitted that more waste had been stored there than previously thought. In the 1960's, the local population had been assured that the nuclear waste was only to be stored at the site for testing purposes. In fact, around 126,000 barrels of radioactive waste were put there between 1967 and 1978. "Research alone cannot explain this storage," Schavan said.

Mismanagement

Until the end of 2008, the Asse dump was operated by the Helmholtz Center in Munich, an institution that belongs to the federal Ministry of Research. It was then put into the hands of the Federal Office for Radiation Protection (BfS) because, according to Schavan, "research institutes are not ideally equipped to deal with the complex problems of reconstruction and waste disposal."

The BfS, which belongs to the federal Environment Ministry, is expected to decide on Friday whether Asse will be filled with concrete and special chemicals, if the waste is to be stored at a deeper location in the mine, or if it has to be removed.

Sharing costs

Schavan also said that the government expected energy companies to contribute to the cost of shutting down the nuclear waste dump at Asse.

"We believe there should be a contribution from industry, because they also profited from the installation," she said, adding that the government had agreed this policy in its coalition agreement.

bk/dpa/AFP

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