

**HISTORY OF COMPLAINT  
CAS-6885851  
BETWEEN TIM RICKMAN AND BBC**

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**TR TO BBC:**

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/ideas/videos/the-nuclear-dilemma/p09rsq3p>

At 6:38 the video narrator, referring to nuclear power, states: "The highly radioactive waste it generates is hugely challenging to store safely....". This statement is not true.

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**BBC TO TR:**

BBC Complaints - Case number CAS-6885851-J9J2V9

18 Aug 2021 at 17:11

BBC Complaints <bbc\_complaints\_website@contact.bbc.co.uk>

To: Timothy Rickman <timrick3@yahoo.co.uk>

Reference CAS-6885851-J9J2V9

Dear Mr Rickman,

Thank you for contacting us about the BBC Ideas video 'The nuclear dilemma'.

We note your concerns regarding the accuracy of the statement 'The highly radioactive waste it generates is hugely challenging to store safely'.

The focus of this video that was made in partnership with the Open University, was to look at the possible benefits and drawbacks of nuclear power in light of the deepening climate crisis.

Please be assured that we aim to report as comprehensively and accurately as possible.

That said, we appreciate that you feel we could have done differently on this occasion.

We do value your feedback about this. All complaints are sent to senior management and we've included your points in our overnight report. These reports are among the most widely read sources of feedback in the company and ensures that your concerns have been seen by the right people quickly. This helps inform their decisions about current and future content.

Thanks again for taking the time to get in touch.

Kind regards,

Dave Ferguson

BBC Complaints Team  
[www.bbc.co.uk/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints)

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**TR TO BBC:**

As previously explained, at 6:38 the video narrator, referring to nuclear power, states: "The highly radioactive waste it generates is hugely challenging to store safely....". This statement is not true. Despite my original complaint, the BBC has still not admitted this, and it has not removed or corrected the untruthful statement.

The contradiction of the truth in the video is serious because there is no realistic chance of climate change being effectively tackled without very rapid and widespread adoption of nuclear energy, and misguided public concern about nuclear waste is a leading impediment to this. The untruthful statement in the video therefore must be immediately removed from public access. Please respond to my continuing complaint (which has not been sent to any authority outside the BBC).

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**BBC TO TR:**

BBC Complaints - Case Number - CAS-6885851-J9J2V9  
22 Oct 2021 at 15:18

BBC Complaints <[bbc\\_complaints\\_website@contact.bbc.co.uk](mailto:bbc_complaints_website@contact.bbc.co.uk)>  
To: Timothy Rickman <[timrick3@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:timrick3@yahoo.co.uk)>  
Reference CAS-6885851-J9J2V9

Dear Mr Rickman,

Thanks for getting in touch again regarding the BBC Ideas film, The nuclear dilemma.

Working closely with experts at The Open University we were very careful to show both the benefits and drawbacks of nuclear power. We appreciate that you felt that this statement "The highly radioactive waste it generates is hugely challenging to store safely...." was inaccurate, but we don't agree. Whilst low level nuclear waste is relatively straightforward to deal with, high level nuclear waste can remain harmful to humans for thousands of years and requires careful storage in specially constructed disposal facilities.

Thanks for your feedback.

This concludes Stage 1 of our complaints process. That means we can't correspond with you further here. If you remain unhappy, you can now contact the BBC's Executive Complaints Unit (ECU). The ECU is Stage 2 of the BBC's complaints process. You'll need to explain why you think there's a potential breach of standards, or if the issue is significant and should still be investigated. Please do so within 20

working days of this reply.  
Full details of how we handle complaints are available at

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/handle-complaint/>

How to contact the ECU:

We've provided a unique link for you in this email. This will open up further information about how to submit your complaint. You'll be asked for the case reference number we've provided in this reply. Once you've used the link and submitted your complaint, the link will no longer work.

This is your link to contact the ECU if you wish:  
[Click Here](#)

Kind regards

BBC Complaints Team  
[www.bbc.co.uk/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints)

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**TR TO BBC:**

Complaint to ECU regarding CAS-6885851-J9J2V9:

I wish to ECU to reconsider all the points I have previously made, particularly the untrue statement about nuclear power waste in the BBC Ideas film, then to reply to me.

From the context, it is apparent that the BBC / Open University are actually referring to disposal (not storage) of used fuel from civil power reactors (not high level waste) but that they were insufficiently technically literate or journalistically competent to say so. It happens that neither storage nor disposal (nor transport) of civil used fuel is at all challenging (let alone hugely challenging). For such material to be significantly harmful to humans for thousands of years (as opposed to a few hundred years) would require humans to first gain access to, then eat, substantial quantities of used fuel (a solid, which after thousands of years is not even significantly water soluble). Contrary to the BBC's most recent response, the "storage" (apparently meaning disposal) of such used fuel does not need to be done especially carefully (although it normally is done very carefully). This is because used fuel containers are extremely robust and the potential for harm is very low compared with other forms of (non-power-generation) toxic waste which may be fluid or uncontained or otherwise mobile and, unlike used nuclear fuel, will normally remain toxic for ever. Selection of used fuel disposal sites must be done competently but, in the USA for example, this work has already been done and the best site was immediately obvious, so that work was not at all challenging (let alone hugely challenging). The best USA disposal site is big enough for the whole world's used civil nuclear power fuel many times over, and it already contains a greater quantity of non-civil-power nuclear waste. Global transport of used fuel is routine and incident-free, and deep burial at an existing facility is a trivial task without any apparent radiological risks. Similarly, continuing to store used fuel

simply consists of doing nothing (except occasional monitoring) until disposal is carried out.

In order for the ECU to understand enough about disposal or storage of used civil power reactor fuel to competently assess my complaint, it will be necessary for ECU members to watch the whole of this

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FC1UK3oaRqo> video lecture by (I believe) the world's best-known and most communicative real expert on that exact subject. He explicitly states in the video how disposal (and, indeed, storage and transport) of used fuel is very easy and trouble-free (given the correct disposal location) and explains in detail why that is so. Of course, there are other ways to dispose of (or recycle, or store) used civil fuel, in addition to the disposal method described in the video but, at least in theory, more options should not make disposal more difficult.

I note that the first response to my complaint from the BBC made no effort to address the content of my complaint and functioned merely to delay resolution, waste resources and form an extra impediment to correction of the BBC's behaviour. My objection to this conduct by the BBC therefore now also forms a part of this submission to the ECU.

Contrary to the essence of BBC's response, it takes more to make some task challenging than just the use of a specially constructed facility (especially if the facility has already been constructed) and/or the handling of material with some long-term toxicity, and/or even the practice of being careful. Most human activities use specially constructed facilities and involve handling material or waste with some toxicity (normally lasting much longer than that of used nuclear fuel) and a few such activities are done more carefully than strictly necessary, but that doesn't make such activities challenging, let alone hugely challenging. It is true that, after disposal of used civil nuclear fuel has taken place, there is nothing more to be done for thousands of years (indeed for eternity) but that doesn't make any part of the activity challenging (let alone hugely challenging) either.

In short, the BBC Ideas film made an untrue statement which was presumably based on a commonplace myth promoted for decades in blatant anti-nuclear propaganda published by the BBC and many others. Such untruthful broadcasting is greatly damaging to the prospects of the world effectively tackling climate change (which relies mostly upon expansion of nuclear power generation). The BBC therefore needs to remove the statement from its website and publish a conspicuous explanation and correction. The BBC should also work to gain enough understanding of power generation subjects in general to enable future coverage of nuclear and renewables issues to be constructive, informative and true, unlike what is typically broadcast and published by the BBC at present.

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**BBC TO TR:**

British Broadcasting Corporation Broadcast Centre, BC2 B4, 201 Wood Lane, London, W12 7TP

Telephone: 020 8743 8000



Executive Complaints Unit

Mr T Rickman

Email: [timrick3@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:timrick3@yahoo.co.uk)

Ref: CAS-6885851

2 December 2021

Dear Mr Rickman

**The nuclear dilemma, BBC Ideas Website**

I am writing to let you know the outcome of the Executive Complaints Unit's investigation into your recent complaint about an aspect of a [report](#) on nuclear power on the BBC Ideas website. I am sorry you do not think your complaint was handled appropriately at the first stage of the BBC's complaints process and so I hope I can address your concerns here.

I have understood you to say it was inaccurate and misleading to refer to nuclear power and state "*The highly radioactive waste it generates is hugely challenging to store safely*". You suggested this "*was presumably based on a commonplace myth promoted for decades in blatant anti-nuclear propaganda*". I have therefore considered your complaint in light of the BBC's editorial standards for Accuracy which are set out in its [Editorial Guidelines](#). In the course of my investigation, I have watched the [video](#) you cited in your complaint to this Unit and carried out some additional research into the geological disposal of all levels of radioactive waste.

The Editorial Guidelines require the content of reports to be well sourced and based on sound evidence, and to present facts and relevant opinions in a way which are appropriate to the subject matter. In this case, the report considered the arguments for and against generating electricity from nuclear power stations as one way to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases. One of the issues which was considered was how to dispose of, or store, the high level radioactive waste which is produced (I think disposal and storage can be regarded as broadly synonymous in the context of a report aimed at a general audience).

There appears to be an international consensus that the safest permanent solution to managing the high activity radioactive waste which is produced is to put it several hundred metres below ground in a Geological Disposal Facility. I appreciate you think the BBC report was actually referring to "*used fuel from civil power reactors (not high level waste)*" but I am not clear on what basis you have reached such a conclusion. In the report, Dr Claire Corkhill, a recognised expert in nuclear waste disposal, explained



the issue of safety was focused primarily on the very small proportion of extremely radioactive waste which is produced, what she described as high-level waste:

*High-level waste is very high radioactivity material, but we have the smallest volume of this, just less than 1%. The radiation from high-level waste is so intense that, if you were to touch it, you'd receive a radiation dose about a million times more than you would receive throughout an entire year just from natural radiation sources. It's extremely high for several thousands, even hundreds of thousands of years, so, ideally, where we want to be is in a place where we can isolate those wastes from future populations in a safe way - for example, digging a very deep hole underground and disposing of the waste there forever.*

The voiceover went on to explain there is only one country in the world, Finland, which is currently building a permanent facility for high-level radioactive waste; other countries are using temporary facilities. The report offered one potential reason:

*Because most people don't like the idea of living next to radioactive waste, it's been very difficult for governments to find a suitable site, let alone start building one.*

This appears to be borne out by the experience of the [UK Government](#). It is still seeking to identify a geological disposal site for higher activity radioactive waste in England and Wales.

On the basis of the evidence above, it seems reasonable to assume viewers would understand it is the disposal of higher activity radioactive waste which needs a permanent underground solution (as opposed to being packaged in specially engineered containers which are stored at nuclear sites around the country). The conclusion to the BBC report, which included the phrase which prompted your complaint, made reference to this as follows:

*As our understanding of the climate crisis deepens, and energy demands continue to grow, the necessity that our energy comes from non-fossil fuel sources makes nuclear power hard to ignore. It is expensive and it can be dangerous if safety protocols are not followed. The highly radioactive waste it generates is hugely challenging to store safely, but it also provides a reliable power baseline, keeping the lights from turning off on a cloudy, windless winter evening and meeting countries' energy needs as they transition away from fossil fuels. And that is the nuclear dilemma.*

Viewers who had watched the whole report would, therefore, have understood the comment about safe storage being "*hugely challenging*" referred to high level radioactive waste. They would also have understood from earlier sections of the report that the issues which made this hugely challenging including finding an appropriate site, getting support from the local community, and managing the engineering complexities of building tunnels and vaults several hundred metres underground. I note Radioactive Waste Management, the body set up in 2014 with responsibility for the planning and implementation of any geological disposal facility in the UK, recognises in its [annual report](#) "*There is no denying the huge challenges involved in this work*". Accordingly, I cannot agree viewers would have been misled in any significant way by the wording used when it is judged in the light of the report as a

whole. As an aside, I note Dr Conca identified a further challenge to the permanent disposal of high level waste in his online lecture, namely the political aspect to any decision.

In conclusion, I do not believe there are grounds for me to uphold your complaint. There is no further right of appeal against this decision within the BBC's complaints process but if you do wish to take the matter further, it is open to you to ask the broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, to consider your complaint. You can find details of how to contact Ofcom and the procedures it will apply at the following website: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/how-to-report-a-complaint>. You can also write to Ofcom at Riverside House, 2a Southwark Bridge Road, London SE1 9HA, or telephone either 0300 123 3333 or 020 7981 3040.

Yours sincerely



**Colin Tregear**  
Complaints Director

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## TR TO OFCOM:

COMPLAINT TO OFCOM  
resulting from  
complaint CAS-6885851-J9J2V9 to BBC

### PREAMBLE

Throughout the BBC's on-line Ideas video "The nuclear dilemma" and the BBC's various responses to my complaint, storage and disposal are confused and conflated, as is civil power generation waste with other highly radioactive waste, and numerous statements (mostly not worth discussing here) are made which are not true on a global scale. However, it happens that neither storage nor disposal are at all problematic, and that repositories used for disposal of highly radioactive military, medical or industrial waste are also suitable for permanent disposal of civil power generation waste (typically described by anti-nuclear campaigners, and hence by the BBC, as "high level waste"). So, at least, so far as I can tell, the BBC and I are talking about doing somewhat related things with the same stuff, even if the filmmakers and BBC do not understand the actual composition of the stuff or how to properly describe it.

For brevity, I will not discuss most of the ECU's recent response (from round 3 of the BBC complaint process). However, a few sentences do deserve comment. The ECU states:

[Viewers of the BBC's "The nuclear dilemma" video] would also have understood from earlier sections of the report that the issues which made this hugely challenging including finding an appropriate site, getting support from the local community, and managing the engineering complexities of building tunnels and vaults several hundred metres underground.

Finding an appropriate site is indeed extremely important. Fortunately, as we know from watching James Conca's lecture, an ideal site with capacity to contain all the highly radioactive waste the world will create during the expected lifespan of our civilisation already exists and is in use. Identifying the site and building the facility were not challenging, as the characteristics of the salt deposit were understood and deep salt mining is an established engineering activity. The site, being remote, effectively had no existing local residents. However, despite the existence of the existing USA facility, it is likely that a few countries will build their own facilities for permanent disposal (once they have enough radioactive waste to justify it) assuming they have suitable geological conditions and support from any local residents. If they don't have these things, then they probably shouldn't try to do a disposal project themselves and should use another country's repository instead. But either way, it need not be challenging.

The ECU also comment:

As an aside, I note Dr Conca identified a further challenge to the permanent disposal of high level waste in his online lecture, namely the political aspect to any decision.

To this, I can only reiterate that if any country can't do disposal of civil power generation waste easily for any reason, it should just not do it. There are enough other countries that easily and safely can do it, and most permanent radioactive disposal sites will be far bigger than required to deal with any single country's waste. Dr Conca favours the USA repository being used for all such waste (since it is plenty big enough and of superlative quality) and his comment, which was mentioned in the ECU's aside as copied above, clearly referred only to countries or locations where political issues have been created in relation to proposed or future potential projects.

The ECU claim to find it significant that the term "huge challenges" has previously been used in relation to plans for geological disposal facility construction within the UK, as follows:

I note Radioactive Waste Management, the body set up in 2014 with responsibility for the planning and implementation of any geological disposal facility in the UK, recognises in its annual report "There is no denying the huge challenges involved in this work".

I note that, while the USA has already done the necessary research, built a facility, and packaged then permanently disposed of thousands of tons of very radioactive waste, the UK body in question, RWM, has yet to dispose of anything. So it is hardly surprising that RWM should announce in its annual report that its task (of which it has apparently achieved virtually nothing) is challenging. It is difficult for us to know just how challenging RWM has really found their job because we do not know how hard they have actually been trying. Indeed, until my attention was drawn to them by the response to my complaint, I do not remember ever hearing of RWM before or knowing of their existence. I certainly do not believe their utterances are authoritative or necessarily indicative, even if that were relevant, even within the UK.



## SUBSTANTIVE POINTS

The BBC have evidently given up using their defence, from round 2, that there is something difficult or potentially hazardous about storing or disposing of the most radioactive waste from civil power generation. Now, instead, they seem to be tacitly acknowledging that such storage/disposal is easy and safe, but are claiming that their "hugely challenging" statement refers to overcoming a public reluctance to supporting storage or disposal. I do not believe "hugely challenging" in the video ever referred to overcoming public sentiment, nor that that it was ever intended to, nor that it has ever been interpreted as meaning such a thing by any viewer of the BBC video, nor that the BBC should be allowed to get away with such a flimsy defence now. I invite Ofcom not to believe those things either, based on the following points.

First, note the word "safely". If the "hugely challenging" statement refers to physically storing or disposing of material (as I believe it does) then "safely" has a natural and constructive role in the sentence, because doing something dangerously or recklessly tends to be assumed to be less challenging than doing it conscientiously and safely. The task of persuading the public that something should be done, on the other hand, becomes less challenging when the proposed activity is to be carried out safely, so inclusion of the word "safely" obviously would have been entirely inappropriate if the sentence had ever been intended to have any such meaning. This indicates that the sentence refers to physical activity, not to overcoming some issue with public perception.

Second, it is not only viewers of the BBC video that interpret the "hugely challenging" statement as referring to actual storage or disposal. Here is the whole of the relevant part of the BBC's round 2 response to my complaint, presenting defensive arguments presumably written by the makers of the video:

We appreciate that you felt that this statement "The highly radioactive waste it generates is hugely challenging to store safely...." was inaccurate, but we don't agree. Whilst low level nuclear waste is relatively straightforward to deal with, high level nuclear waste can remain harmful to humans for thousands of years and requires careful storage in specially constructed disposal facilities.

From this, it is clear that the writers also interpreted the "hugely challenging" statement as referring entirely to actual physical storage or disposal, not to overcoming any possible public resistance to proposals to undertake such activity. If, as it seems, even the filmmakers themselves think the statement means that storage or disposal is challenging, then viewers can hardly be expected to detect some obscure alternative meaning!

Third, the public resistance against disposal that the BBC claim to be referring to (and shamelessly stoking with this very video) exists only in countries where baseless fears have been created by anti-nuclear campaigners and media such as the BBC. Finland, where the population understand the issue, found public support for the repository they are building. The USA apparently experienced no great opposition to the repository they have already used to dispose of thousands of tons of highly radioactive and long-lived non-civil-energy waste, while resistance there focuses instead on civil-energy-related waste which is easier to deal with but has more

propaganda potential for competing industries (like fossil fuel suppliers). In most countries, there is not great public resistance to storage or disposal of highly radioactive waste, because the malign influence and distorted reporting on such subjects by broadcasters like the BBC is less, and because vested interests and others have not yet put much effort into campaigning there. The narrator in the BBC's video says "Because most people don't like the idea of living next to radioactive waste, it's been very difficult for governments to find a suitable site, let alone start building one" but he misrepresents the situation because most people around the world have no view on the subject, while many people living near civil nuclear power generation plants already happily live with highly radioactive used fuel stored close to them. Disposal sites such as those already built or under construction provide greater separation distance due to depth and (predictably) geographical remoteness from human habitation. So, even if the "hugely challenging" statement had referred to overcoming public resistance (which obviously was not the case) it would not have been generally true anyway.

Fourth, even to the extent that public resistance to highly radioactive waste disposal does exist, as for example in the UK, it exists because most people have been misinformed by various sources, including the BBC, including the use of such misleading statements as the "hugely challenging" sentence we are now discussing. So, by attempting to justify its actions through reference to the existing widespread misapprehension of the subject, the BBC is working to create a circular argument by which the untruthful statement it is now making is rendered true by the untruths previously told by itself and others. This "give a dog a bad name" approach is roughly the equivalent of some apartheid-era South African government minister stating that black people can't pass exams (true, if such statements in themselves prevent black access to higher education). Further, since the BBC is, as yet, declining to correct its statement, it is deliberately perpetuating the circle of misinformation, contributing to the creation and reinforcement a lie so pervasive that reality eventually comes to conform to it. So obvious is the logic of this, I now conclude from the ECU's round 3 response that the BBC is doing this knowingly.

I request that Ofcom instruct the BBC to reconsider their position with a view to correcting the clearly untruthful and misleading statements made in the BBC video.

Tim Rickman, December 2021.

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**ENDS.**