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A Framework For NZ To Plan To Meet A Nuclear Disaster

(From Richard Ninness in Wellington)

The first phase in making New Zealand less vulnerable to the effects of a nuclear war was completed recently with the publication of "New Zealand after Nuclear War" by the New Zealand Planning Council.

"Once we acknowledge that it could happen then we strengthen our determination to work to prevent that," said Mr Phill Goff, who commissioned the report as Minister for the Environment.

"We are right on the edge of science fiction."

The report establishes a

framework from which New Zealand can plan to meet such a disaster.

Mr Goff expects public submissions to the Ministry of Environment to indicate where more research is needed.

He said the public must be involved. "We could have the best plans in the world, but if the public had been kept in the dark... then we would have a major problem."

The necessity of research and public knowledge has been highlighted by the report which shows the direct consequences of a nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere — the effects of radiation and a "nuclear winter" — would be comparatively negligible in New Zealand. The country could receive enough radiation to increase long-term cases of cancer and the climate would be cooled a little for the first year.

DEVASTATION

New Zealanders would survive — but the society would be devastated.

The "worst case" scenario is that an EMP (electromagnetic pulse created by a high-altitude nuclear detonation) would affect New Zealand indirectly through Australia being targeted.

This would immediately knock-out New Zealand's energy, communication and transport systems. Nearly all computers would be made useless. New Zealand would be in the dark, literally, reliant on older, more resilient equipment and batteries for immediate communication.

Some electricity could be restored; after a day sewerage and water plants might operate.

But the scale of disruption is difficult to imagine.

Most cars would not run. Money would not be available through a banking system. Food would be a priority and most shops would be incapable, if willing, to sell anything.

Information, which is vital in order for people to be able to make decisions, would be scarce.

Without and EMP, New Zealand would be better off.

Society would have longer to adjust to the changes that would have to be made as systems broke down.

For the study highlights New Zealand's complete dependence on foreign technology.

The most disturbing aspect is a virtual 100 per cent dependence on imported drugs. The report suggests we would return to the health standards of 50 years ago.

"We need to look at what we import, we need to look at whether there are substitutes available in New Zealand, whether, even at some expense, we could convert some of our redundant industries into producing the

pharmaceuticals and, indeed, other goods we may need," said Mr Goff.

"My belief is that there can be an alternative to the complete break-down of society."

Mr Goff said we are unlikely to go to the extreme of a survivalist technique for New Zealand, but contingency plans to reduce the vulnerability of society would be introduced after the second phase study.

The Cabinet's domestic and external security committee which is reviewing all disaster recovery procedures is likely to guide the planning, though Mr Goff said the public will determine how far government should go.

"The reason why there has never been a report like this before is because no government that wanted to, associate New Zealand in a nuclear alliance and depend upon the so-called nuclear umbrella to defend it could afford to allow the public of New Zealand to appreciate the consequences of nuclear war.

Mr Goff said the Government's aim ought to be to continue working towards international disarmament.

"In this case prevention is infinitely better than cure."