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Russia to Remove Hazardous Nuclear Objects Dumped in Its Arctic Waters

The country's nuclear energy company will over the next eight years lift two submarines and four reactor compartments from the bottom of the Barents and Kara Seas.

By The Barents Observer

August 05, 2020



From the late 1960s to the late 1980s, about 18,000 radioactive objects were dumped into Russia's remote northern waters. **bellona.org**

Russia's state nuclear agency plans to remove several nuclear objects from the depths of Russia's Arctic waters in an effort to reduce environmental hazards, Rosatom said this week as it presented a clean-up plan for the region.

From the late 1960s to the late 1980s, about 18,000 radioactive objects were dumped into Russia's remote northern waters. Most of them present little environmental risk. But some are increasingly seen as a hazard to Arctic ecosystems.

"Rosatom over the next eight years intends to lift from the bottom of Russia's Arctic waters six objects that are most dangerous in terms of radioactive pollution," the company's spokesperson told the state-run TASS news agency.

The company plans to lift the reactors from the K-11, K-19 and K-140 submarines as well as spent nuclear fuel from the reactor that served the Lenin icebreaker.

In addition, two entire submarines will be lifted: the K-27 from the Kara Sea and K-159 from the Barents Sea. While the former was deliberately dumped by Soviet authorities in 1982, the latter sank during a towing operation in 2003.

The K-27 is located in 33-meter depths east of the Novaya Zemlya archipelago. It has been described by experts as a potential radioactive "time bomb." The K-159 is located in 200-meter depths off the coast of the Kola Peninsula.

These six objects represent more than 90% of radioactive sources dumped at sea, Rosatom said.

The remaining dumped objects are considered to be of little danger.

"According to studies, about 95% of the 18,000 dumped objects have naturally become safe; they have been covered by mud and the level of gamma rays in their surroundings is in line with natural levels," Rosatom's representative told TASS.

Lifting the six hazardous nuclear objects will not only be technically difficult, but also very expensive.

A recent report made for Rosatom and the European Commission estimated the costs of lifting these six objects at 278 million euros. That includes the cost of bringing them safely to a yard for decommissioning and long-term storage.

Lifting the K-159 alone is estimated to cost 57.5 million euros. Lifting the K-27 and transporting it to a shipyard for decommissioning and long-term storage in Saida Bay will carry a price tag of 47.7 million euros, the report said.

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It's unlikely that Russia's increasingly cash-strapped treasury will have the 278 million euros needed for the cleanup.

Several countries have previously allocated billions to assist Russia's post-Soviet efforts to cope with nuclear waste.

Norway has since the mid-90s granted about 1.5 billion kroner (140 million euros) to nuclear safety projects in the Russian part of the Barents region.

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