

Nuclear notes

Newsletter on Nuclear Waste in Northern Ontario - Issue One, Volume Two - July 2003

Nuke Waste Agency Releases Plan to Produce Report for November 2005

Shortly after releasing a report which describes Canadians as uninformed and even indifferent to nuclear waste and its long term management, the Nuclear Waste Management Organization outlined its plans to consult and engage Canadians on options for the long term management of nuclear fuel waste. The plan was first unveiled during a speech to the Canadian Nuclear Association, and through posting on the NWMO web site.

The NWMO's first report simply titled "Report on Discussion Group Findings" describes the Canadian public as holding "anti-nuclear attitudes largely shaped by shows like The Simpsons", and says that when Canadians in seven cities were asked about nuclear waste, they were so uninformed they couldn't discuss disposal options intelligently. The report concluded that Canadians preferred to hand the waste decision over to "some sort of arm's-length agency, like the NWMO", rather than make any major effort to become informed on such a complex issue. The report claims that participants were "chosen for their news awareness or involvement with current issues" which suggests that the NWMO consultants used a fairly careful screening process to assemble the 14 different focus groups in 7 different cities. No focus groups were held in northeastern Ontario, the area most likely to be sited with a nuclear waste dump if the "geological disposal" option is selected.

Seemingly without missing a beat, NWMO president Elizabeth Dowdeswell then unveiled the NWMO's consultation plan at the annual meeting of the Canadian Nuclear Association, saying that the agency is planning an extensive citizen engagement process, relying heavily on its Web site. In a speech to the Canadian Nuclear Society in early June, Dowdeswell emphasized that all options are on the table, and that the NWMO's work will be "rigorously neutral."

"I am neither an advocate nor an apologist for the nuclear industry," she said. However, Dowdeswell is well known for her support of fusion research, and sits on the board of ITER Canada - a detail that does not appear in the bio provided by the Nuclear Waste Management Organization.

The NWMO "study plan" includes four phases, with the agency now in Phase 2 "Exploring the Fundamental Issues" (Phase I apparently consisted of a series of "informal conversations", including the focus groups and a series of private meetings).

While the web site's presentation of the study plan is big on graphics and the presentation of study plan milestones, it's short on the substance or explicit descriptions of what is to happen and how the public will be engaged. The NWMO "begins to explore" issues through "a number of activities" to "provide an information base for dialogue". A collection of background papers by "recognized experts" will be commissioned to present "factual information on the current status of nuclear fuel waste and the context for its long-term management" and the NWMO will "begin to develop a preliminary framework for analyzing and assessing the alternative management approaches".

The study plan describes activities leading to the release of a first "Discussion Document" as "designed to engage expert advice and assistance and to allow for in-depth citizen dialogue and deliberation", and lists an expert round table on ethics, a multi-interest workshop to develop scenarios, a workshop to draw on aboriginal wisdom (traditional knowledge), a dialogue forum for existing reactor site communities, a meeting of international experts, and, of course, the "views of all Canadians will be sought through the NWMO web-site". Web site plans are for a survey, background papers for review and comment, and an "e-dialogue".

No actual timeline is provided, although a graphic suggests that the first Discussion Document will be released in late 2003, towards the end of Phase 2.

The third phase of the "study plan" will consist of an "Evaluation of Management Approaches", and will include an assessment of the management approaches, to be presented in NWMO's Discussion Document 2, expected mid-year, 2004. A draft Study Report will be released in early 2005, and will provide for formal public comment and review NWMO's recommendation for a long-term management approach for nuclear fuel waste. The NWMO's final report and recommendations are required by November 15, 2005.

The NWMO was created by the nuclear industry based on the requirements of the Nuclear Waste Act which came into effect on November 15, 2002. The NWMO has three years to examine three options for nuclear fuel waste management: storage at current locations, a centralized storage facility, or burial in the Canadian Shield.



Inside this Issue: Nuclear Waste Management Organization Releases Multi-Phase Plan to Look at Options for Nuclear Fuel Waste
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Nuclear Notes is published by Northwatch, a public interest group in Northeastern Ontario concerned about proposals to bury highly radioactive nuclear fuel waste in the Canadian Shield of northern Ontario

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CNSC Releases Rad Waste Policy

The Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission has issued a draft regulatory policy, on managing radioactive waste. A notice posted on the Commission's web site states that "the proposed policy describes the principles that the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission will take into account when making regulatory decisions that concern the management of radioactive waste". The policy "expresses the CNSC's commitment to consulting and cooperating with other national and international agencies to promote consistent national and international standards for radioactive wastes and to achieve conformity with measures of control and international obligations to which Canada has agreed with respect to radioactive waste".

Comments are required by August 1, 2003. Copies of the draft policy are available at www.nuclearsafety.gc.ca or by calling 613 947 3981 and asking for a copy of "P-290 Managing Radioactive Waste".

CNSC FUNDS NUKE-WASTE STORAGE STUDY

The Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission is paying for the study of water in the depths of the Con Mine in Yellowknife, NWT, to "better understand the risks of storing nuclear waste underground". According to media reports, the CNSC considers the Con Mine to be an ideal laboratory to learn about "safe" nuclear-waste disposal because of the mine's age, depth and the amount of geological information available. But commission spokesperson Michel Cleroux says Con is not being considered for a nuclear-disposal site.

"Our only purpose is to ensure that we have the knowledge to make sure that when anyone comes to us with a plan or a proposal that we will have the scientific knowledge sufficient to make a good, sound judgement," Cleroux says.

Cleroux says the commission needs the information because it's responsible for licencing disposal sites for spent fuel from nuclear reactors.

MISMANAGEMENT AT YUCCA MOUNTAIN: Staff Reassigned to Cover Up Flaws in Project Procedure

In an apparent effort to stifle any criticism of the effort to establish Nevada's Yucca Mountain as the main American repository of high-level nuclear waste, Yucca project managers from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) reassigned three of four members of a "quality assurance" review team following their discovery of flaws in the project's work procedures. They were reassigned from their positions on the quality assurance review team for the Yucca contractor Navarro Research and Engineering after they uncovered faults in the Yucca project work procedures that were being revised by Bechtel SAIC, a top contractor for the proposed repository.

Another Yucca quality insurance auditor, Jim Mattimoe, was fired after he raised criticisms of the way in which project concerns were handled. A review by the U.S. Department of Labor ultimately determined that his firing had been unfair.

"I have seen many times when issues are put aside or dismissed," said Bill Belke, a recently-retired NRC oversight officer for the Yucca project, to the Las Vegas Sun. "This creates a chilling effect on the project," Belke added. "People are afraid of retaliation and retribution. It's unhealthy. And it's not good for the program." Belke had worked on the project for 15 years prior to his retirement.

Yucca Mountain, located 80 miles northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada, is the only site under consideration for a proposed repository to store 77,000 tons of high-level radioactive waste from U.S. weapons sites and commercial nuclear reactors. Although Congress capitulated to the nuclear industry's powerful pro-Yucca lobby and voted to overturn Nevada's veto of the dangerous dump, numerous scientific, economic and policy problems continue to plague the Yucca Mountain Project.

Ontario's electricity future in jeopardy? Report cites nuke phaseout as best response

Ontario will lose about 35 per cent of its electricity supply over the next 10 or 15 years as the province's nuclear-power plants reach the end of their lifespans, a report released mid-July says. That leaves the province with the options of spending billions to replace the plants or embarking on aggressive conservation and efficiency programs.

"The crisis is looming and it will make what we've been through this summer look like a Sunday school picnic if we don't start addressing it now," said Ralph Torrie, who wrote the report for the group Campaign for Nuclear Phaseout.

The report says the province could phase out both their nuclear and coal plants. Because Ontario is forced to rely on its five coal-fired plants whenever its nuclear reactors are out of service, it has been almost impossible for the province to get rid of its smog-spewing plants.

Critics argue nuclear plants are notoriously unreliable, potentially dangerous, and the radioactive waste they produce makes them anything but environmentally friendly.

The report says Ontario could reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 75 per cent from electricity production by 2020 through a program that phases out both coal and nuclear plants.

That would mean losing about 60 per cent of the current domestic production in Ontario.

However, savings of 50 per cent in consumption could be achieved with more energy efficient appliances, homes and buildings. New wind, solar and other environmentally friendly generation sources would ensure an adequate supply, the report says.

The report cites astronomical cost overruns at the province's nuclear plants and their poor performance as being at the core of Ontario's electricity problems. Eight of 20 reactors were laid up between 1995 and 1998 for safety reasons and getting them back online has proven costly and difficult.

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Visit www.cnp.ca for a copy of the report*