

Is Ottawa more concerned with saving the nuclear industry than protecting Canadians from radioactive waste contamination?

By Gordon Edwards, CCNR President

www.ccnr.org/policy_vacuum_2018.pdf

Canadian public interest organizations are chagrined that the Government of Canada is colluding with the international nuclear industry to promote a whole new generation of nuclear reactors, called Small Modular Nuclear Reactors (SMNRs), while refusing to consult with First Nations and other Canadians about the lack of a federal policy for the long-term management of radioactive wastes, except for irradiated nuclear fuel. See www.ccnr.org/Trudeau_pack_5_e.pdf

On November 7, 2018, in the midst of a three-day international conference on SMNRs in Ottawa, the Ministry of Natural Resources will release its “Road Map” on the deployment of these new reactors – hitherto unbuilt, untested and unlicensed – throughout Canada.

In a recent article, while promoting the dubious benefits of SMNRs, Diane Cameron of NRCan mentions the radioactive waste problem without really saying much about it:

“Through the roadmap, we are anticipating the waste stream coming from SMRs and are setting up the necessary measures in advance. It helps that we already have one of the most rigorous nuclear waste management frameworks in the world.” See <http://magazine.cim.org/en/voices/a-smrt-energy-alternative-en/>

For the edification of those who are unfamiliar with Canada’s “nuclear waste management framework”, cited by Diane Cameron in this promotional article, here it is in its entirety, reproduced below (next page). *The government and the industry use SMR, prudently deleting the word “nuclear” from SMNR, in order to forestall Canadians’ anticipated negative reaction.*

Canada’s Radioactive Waste Policy Framework is precisely 143 words long, the equivalent of about four tweets, and consists of three bullet points. It mentions “nuclear fuel waste, low-level radioactive waste and uranium mine and mill tailings”, but it says nothing whatsoever about post-fission wastes other than irradiated nuclear fuel.

For example, it makes no mention of radioactive refurbishment waste, of intermediate-level radioactive waste from reactor operations (including contaminated equipment), of radioactive rubble resulting from the demolition of defunct nuclear reactors, of radioactive soil and sludge from excavating contaminated trenches and underground plumes where liquid radioactive waste has leaked or been dispersed for decades, of radioactive waste from the dismantling of hundreds of contaminated labs and buildings (some of them used for plutonium production or fabricating plutonium-based fuel assemblies), or of anything else of a similar nature.

Although the NRCan Radioactive Waste Policy Framework says that “the federal government has the responsibility to develop policy...” in fact Ottawa has not done so with regard to reactor decommissioning wastes or any post-fission wastes other than irradiated nuclear fuel. And despite the rhetoric about the importance of First Nations, there has been no process of consultation with First Nations and other Canadians to develop such a radioactive waste policy on terms that would be acceptable to the indigenous peoples and the Canadian public.

Jim Carr, then Minister of Natural Resources, in a letter dated July 2018, admitted that “Canada does not yet have a federal policy for the long-term management of non-fuel radioactive waste.” (see www.ccnr.org/Carr.pdf)

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<https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/energy/uranium-nuclear/7725>

Radioactive Waste Policy Framework

The elements of a comprehensive radioactive waste policy framework consist of a set of principles governing the institutional and financial arrangements for disposal of radioactive waste by waste producers and owners.

- *The federal government will ensure that radioactive waste disposal is carried out in a safe, environmentally sound, comprehensive, cost-effective and integrated manner.*
- *The federal government has the responsibility to develop policy, to regulate, and to oversee producers and owners to ensure that they comply with legal requirements and meet their funding and operational responsibilities in accordance with approved waste disposal plans.*
- *The waste producers and owners are responsible, in accordance with the principle of "polluter pays", for the funding, organization, management and operation of disposal and other facilities required for their wastes. This recognizes that arrangements may be different for nuclear fuel waste, low-level radioactive waste and uranium mine and mill tailings.*

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Postscript: The Nuclear Fuel Waste Act — an isolated instance

Canada does have a policy for irradiated nuclear fuel, enshrined in the Nuclear Fuel Waste Act. But there is no policy governing other categories of post-fission radioactive waste.

For the first 30 years of the Nuclear Age in Canada, there was no official acknowledgement that radioactive waste from nuclear power was even a problem. Prodded by a massive public outcry in the late 1970s, Canada published the Green Paper "Managing Canada's Nuclear Waste" in 1977. However this document was limited to a discussion of irradiated nuclear fuel, and involved no other kind of radioactive waste.

In a joint effort, the governments of Canada and Ontario launched a 15-year research project into the Geological Disposal concept advanced by Atomic Energy of Canada Limited for the long-term storage of nuclear fuel waste. That effort culminated in a ten-year Environmental Assessment process conducted by the "Seaborn Panel", which held public hearings in five provinces. In their executive summary, the Seaborn Panel said that the geologic disposal concept is promising but "does not have the required level of acceptability to be adopted as Canada's approach for managing nuclear fuel wastes." The Panel stated "the search for a specific site should not proceed" until certain conditions were met. www.ccnr.org/hlw_fearo_summary.html

Among those conditions, the Seaborn Panel unanimously recommended that Canada create a Nuclear Fuel Waste Agency that is independent from the nuclear industry. Instead, Ottawa passed the Nuclear Fuel Waste Act, empowering the main producers of high-level nuclear waste — at that time Ontario Hydro, NB Power, and Hydro Quebec — to establish their own agency (the Nuclear Waste Management Organization, NWMO) to delineate the options through a process of ongoing dialogue with the Canadian public and with the indigenous peoples of Canada. In other words, the industry is in control of deciding Canada's nuclear waste policy.

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The Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility (CCNR) believes that another public consultation process is needed to develop a responsible policy for the long-term management of other post-fission radioactive wastes, laying down certain guiding principles to be followed in addressing this everlasting task. See www.ccnr.org/Trudeau_pack_5_e.pdf

For example, the Anishinabek Nation and the Iroquois Caucus have issued a Joint Declaration on the Storage and Transport of Radioactive Wastes based on the following five principles:

“1. No Abandonment: Radioactive waste materials are damaging to living things. Many of these materials remain dangerous for tens of thousands of years or even longer. They must be kept out of the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the land we live on for many generations to come. The forces of Mother Earth are powerful and unpredictable and no human-made structures can be counted on to resist those forces forever. Such dangerous materials cannot be abandoned and forgotten.

“2. Monitored and Retrievable Storage: Continuous guardianship of nuclear waste material is needed. This means long-term monitoring and retrievable storage. Information and resources must be passed on from one generation to the next so that our grandchildren’s grandchildren will be able to detect any signs of leakage of radioactive waste materials and protect themselves. They need to know how to fix such leaks as soon as they happen.

“3. Better Containment, More Packaging: Cost and profit must never be the basis for long-term radioactive waste management. Paying a higher price for better containment today will help prevent much greater costs in the future when containment fails. Such failure will include irreparable environmental damage and radiation-induced diseases. The right kinds of packaging should be designed to make it easier to monitor, retrieve, and repackage insecure portions of the waste inventory as needed, for centuries to come.

“4. Away from Major Water Bodies: Rivers and lakes are the blood and the lungs of Mother Earth. When we contaminate our waterways, we are poisoning life itself. That is why radioactive waste must not be stored beside major water bodies for the long-term. Yet this is exactly what is being planned at five locations in Canada: Kincardine on Lake Huron, Port Hope near Lake Ontario, Pinawa beside the Winnipeg River, and Chalk River and Rolphton beside the Ottawa River.

“5. No Imports or Exports (as a rule): The import and export of nuclear wastes over public roads and bridges should be forbidden except in truly exceptional cases after full consultation with all whose lands and waters are being put at risk. In particular, the planned shipment of highly radioactive liquid from Chalk River to South Carolina should not be allowed because it can be down-blended and solidified on site at Chalk River. Transport of nuclear waste should be strictly limited and decided on a case-by-case basis with full consultation with all those affected.

See www.ccnr.org/Joint_Declaration_pack.pdf