Groups Warn of Radioactive Waste Shipping Risks on Great Lakes

Demand U.S. Dept. of Transportation Address Potential Accident Before Approving Canadian “Recycling” Plan

Washington, D.C. – A coalition of U.S. and Canadian environmental organizations have petitioned the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) to perform a federally-required environmental impact statement to analyze the risks of a Canadian proposal to ship 16 giant radioactive steam generators on the waters of the Great Lakes. Later this month the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC) will hold a hearing to collect public comments and concerns about the proposal by Bruce Power of Ontario to ship the radioactive wastes via the Great Lakes and Atlantic Ocean to Sweden, where they will be melted down and mixed into the consumer product metal recycling stream.

The Sierra Club’s Michigan Chapter, U.S.-Canadian environmental coalition Great Lakes United, the Canadian Physicians for Global Survival, U.S. national environmental watchdogs Beyond Nuclear and Nuclear Information and Resource Service, and Michigan-based groups Don’t Waste Michigan and Citizens for Alternatives to Chemical Contamination, have written to the DOT’s Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), demanding an official National Environmental Policy Act review of the shipping plans before U.S. federal approval of the major action is granted formal approval. The groups’ letter to PHMSA is posted at www.beyondnuclear.org.

Although the CNSC staff has already admitted that the shipment exceeds International Atomic Energy Agency safety regulations for the amount of radioactivity allowed on board a single ship, the environmental coalition has revealed that the hazardous radioactive inventory within the steam generators, and thus the amount that could be released into the waters of the Great Lakes during an accidental sinking, is actually four times larger than CNSC staff have reported, and 50 times more radioactive than International Atomic Energy Agency standards. In fact, the groups argue the steam generators should be treated as trans-uranic wastes, given the large quantities of plutonium contamination and other alpha-particle emitting radionuclides involved. Plutonium-239, for example, remains hazardous for 240,000 years.

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The Bruce Nuclear Generating Station is owned by Ontario Power Generation and operated by Bruce Power. With eight reactors, six still operational, and an additional permanently shut down prototype reactor, Bruce has the most atomic reactors of any nuclear power plant in the Western Hemisphere, and the second most of any nuclear power plant in the world. In addition to its reactors, Bruce has storage, incineration, and disposal facilities for the so-called “low” and “intermediate” level radioactive wastes from 20 reactors across Ontario. It is located on the shore of Lake Huron, just 50 miles across from Michigan.

“Our review of Bruce Power’s and CNSC’s documents have revealed that this hasty, ill-considered proposal has involved little to no planning whatsoever to deal with an emergency involving the sinking of this shipment, containing as it would over 1,400 tons of radioactive steam generators,” said Terry Lodge, Toledo-based attorney representing the environmental coalition. “We demand that PHMSA do its legal duty under NEPA, and examine the risks, and the less dangerous alternative of a longstanding Canadian plan simply to store the steam generators indefinitely onsite, before granting a U.S. DOT permit for the shipment of these radioactive wastes through U.S. waters on the Great Lakes.”

“The Great Lakes are 20% of the surface fresh water on Earth,” said Michael Keegan of Don’t Waste Michigan. “The shipment of any radioactive wastes on the vital, irreplaceable Great Lakes is an unacceptable risk that could contaminate the drinking water for tens of millions downstream.”

“This proposal would set a dangerous precedent for many more radioactive waste shipments, as well as adding to the contamination of the world’s scrap metal market with hazardous radioactivity,” said Kevin Kamps of Beyond Nuclear. “In addition, the stigma of a radioactive waste transport accident on the Great Lakes would harm many economic sectors, such as tourism, recreation, fisheries, and property values.”

Links to additional information and documents about this issue are posted at the top of Beyond Nuclear’s homepage, www.beyondnuclear.org.

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Beyond Nuclear aims to educate and activate the public about the connections between nuclear power and nuclear weapons and the need to abandon both to safeguard our future. Beyond Nuclear advocates for an energy future that is sustainable, benign and democratic. The Beyond Nuclear team works with diverse partners and allies to provide the public, government officials, and the media with the critical information necessary to move humanity toward a world beyond nuclear.

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