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What comes from the crypt

Erika Simpson

Western University, simpson@uwo.ca

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Opinion Column

A federal panel says a plan to dispose of radioactive waste underground near Lake Huron is sound, but critics remain far from convinced

What comes from the crypt?

Erika Simpson, Special to Postmedia Network

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A month after a federal panel gave its approval to the controversial nuclear waste disposal site along Lake Huron, opponents are keeping up the fight.

Ontario Power Generation (OPG) plans to bury more than 200,000 cubic metres of low- and intermediate-level radioactive waste produced from the Bruce, Darlington and Pickering reactor operations in a series of underground caverns.

After a three-year environmental assessment, including four weeks of public hearings last fall, the panel recommended Minister of the Environment Leona Aglukkaq approve the building of a crypt below the Bruce station near Kincardine, Ont.

Kincardine and OPG have signed a “hosting agreement” under which Kincardine and its neighbouring municipalities will be paid millions of dollars from 2005 to 2034 “so long as they provide their co-operation in support of the environmental approvals and licensing applications sought as well as any other approvals or licences required to to construct or operate the DGR.”

If, at any time OPG determines that they are not “in good faith, exercising best efforts to achieve any of the milestones, OPG may in its sole discretion, acting reasonably, decline to make further annual payments or any further one-time lump sum payments.”

Kincardine received two one-time payments of \$1.3 million in 2005 and 2013, and annual payments since 2005 of \$650,000. Saugeen Shores, Huron Kinloss, Arran Elderslie and Brockton have also received millions of dollars. It is unclear how these local councils are spending their windfall, but millions can buy a lot of things, including acquiescence.

Still, the municipalities aren't the only governments with an interest in the site. For one, it lies on traditional Ojibway territory.

Randall Kahgee, Saugeen Ojibway Nation Chief at the time of the hearings, testified the DGR could not go ahead without its support. He saw this as a “forever” project and pointed out the First Nation does not have a protocol for making decisions past seven generations. The current chief, Vernon Roote, said First Nations are concerned about a possible leak and the impact on future generations.

The Saugeens' stance has drawn support from other First Nations, including the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake and the the Anishinabek Nation.

The plan has critics outside Ontario and Canada, too.

“These wastes have to be isolated from the environment for hundreds of thousands of years; burying them in limestone right beside Lake Huron simply makes no sense,” says Kevin Kamps, a radioactive waste specialist with a U.S. group Beyond Nuclear.

U.S. Congressman Dan Kildee issued a statement expressing his disappointment in the panel's report. “Human error is always a possibility, and if an accident were to happen on the shores of the Great Lakes, a nuclear radiation release could endanger the freshwater supply for over 40 million people, both in the U.S. and Canada.”

Twenty congressional members — 10 Democrats and 10 Republicans — are co-sponsoring a resolution seeking an alternative location.

Even before the panel's report, U.S. senators Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow sent a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry asking him to step in to protect an internationally-shared resource.

Many Americans are asking the bi-national International Joint Commission to review the panel's recommendation. Under Michigan law, nuclear waste is not allowed within 10 miles of the Great Lakes, so why, Americans ask, aren't Canada's nuclear waste laws in line with the U.S.?

Already 154 North American municipalities, including Detroit, Chicago and Toronto, representing more than 21 million people have passed resolutions opposing the depository.

Others question the role of the panel itself, appointed in 2012 by the then-minister of the environment and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission.

“Nuclear waste is everybody's business. Decisions can no longer be left to the discretion of the nuclear establishment and its regulatory bodies,” says Gordon Edwards of the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility. “The Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, appointed by the government, has little or no objectivity in dealing with nuclear waste issues . . . When Linda Keen was fired from her position as head of the CNSC in 2008 for trying to enforce regulatory requirements, I believe that any chance for the CNSC to play an independent role was scuppered,”

Some critics claim this would be one of the most difficult projects conceived in humanity's history. The only example OPG cited of a similar repository, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico, was shut after an underground fire resulted in radioactive releases to the surface in 2014.

Germany's salt mine solution for low-level nuclear waste has proven full of holes as thousands of litres of groundwater leak into the mine every day and mix with radioactive waste.

Nuclear wastes are a 400,000-year radioactive legacy that must be monitored and stored above ground, preferably not in one easily targeted central location.

During the Ice Age — only 10,000 years ago — mile-thick sheets of ice covered the Great Lakes region multiple times, depressing the crust with their weight. Since our descendants may not even have a notion of the language in which the safety codes of any abandoned shaft will be written, our generation must responsibly move the waste away from the source of 20% of the world's fresh water.

Erika Simpson spoke about the proposal to construct an underground nuclear waste site at UN headquarters in New York City during this month's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. She is an associate professor of international relations in the department of political science at Western University.