Federal Minister Delays Decision on Nuclear Waste Depository

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the risks involved. Those risks could include accidents, radioactive leaks to underground water systems, and radioactive emissions to air. The site would contain nuclear waste produced from the continued operation and planned refurbishment of all of Ontario’s 20 nuclear power reactors, including OPG-owned nuclear generators at Bruce, Pickering, and Darlington. In January, the Ontario government announced a $9 billion project to refurbish Darlington’s four Candu units and approved the continued operation of OPG’s Pickering plant to 2024.

Now, Ontario must figure out how to handle its nuclear waste. OPG asserts that its current method of aboveground storage has been safe for more than 40 years, and could continue for several more decades. Opponents of the proposal argue it would be more responsible to continue with this method than to build the DGR. OPG also indicates it would eventually stop monitoring the repository. Elements of the waste will nevertheless remain dangerously radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years. This would mean the proposed repository would have to operate, without maintenance, for a period of time that dwarfs the span of human history.

Questions remain about the role of First Nations in making the decision. The Mohawk Council of Kahnawake sent a supportive letter to Chief Vernon Roote of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON), regarding “your fight to prevent the creation of a repository for nuclear waste on the Bruce power site on the banks of Lake Huron.” During the hearings held in Kincardine, SON Chief Randall Kahgee testified that the proposal could not go ahead without SON’s support. He saw this as a “forever” project and the SON did not have a protocol for looking past seven generations. Grand Council Chief Patrick Madahbee says that the Anishinabek Nation stands behind the SON in opposing the panel’s recommendation to proceed with the plan. He agrees with Chief Roote that First Nations should be concerned about a possible leak and the impact on future generations. “The uncertainties and risk are too great for the Anishinabek Nation and Ontario citizens to consider,” says Madahbee.

Selection of Proposed Site

Selection of this site was based on local council acceptance. The surrounding community’s dependence on the Bruce nuclear power plant for jobs was certainly a factor. Now, however, the concept faces considerable domestic and international opposition. There is concern that alternate locations were not identified from the outset. Opponents say this is contrary to the requirements of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, 2012.

There is doubt about whether the community was adequately informed. OPG’s own poll found most individuals in the region had not heard of the project. A few local citizens worried about the risk of contamination and the stigma surrounding the nuclear dumpsite. They had concerns that this might reduce property values.

In addition, dozens of organizations (including the Bluewater Sportfishing Association, the Coalition for Nuclear Free Great Lakes, Inverhuron Committee, the Métis Nation of Ontario, and the Sierra Club of Michigan) presented oral and written statements.

Precautionary Principle Applies

It is clear that this proposal warrants considerably more input from all levels. The proposal deals not only with the precedent-setting issue of burying nuclear waste, but also involves the location of such a repository close to a valuable water resource.

With the proposal’s potentially serious impacts on both human health and the environment, the precautionary principle must prevail. In cases such as this, the precautionary approach would dictate that the project should not proceed if it might have serious adverse consequences – even if it is not possible to know that these consequences will materialize. This principle aims, as Canada must in this matter, to protect the public from exposure to harm when extensive scientific knowledge on a matter is lacking. MW