Down in the Dumps

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A proposal to store nuclear waste underground near Lake Huron has been through four weeks of hearings, but opponents still aren’t convinced

Four weeks of public hearing for a proposal to bury radioactive waste about a kilo- metre from Lake Huron have wrapped up with little to satisfy the concerns of opponents of the plan.

The joint review panel is con- sidering a proposal from Ontario Power Generation (OPG) to bury more than 200,000 cubic metres of low-level radioactive waste, for exam- ple, cleaning supplies and protect- ive clothing but not used food, in a “deep geo- logical repository” about 1.2 kilo- metres from Lake Huron on the Bruce Nuclear site near Kincar- dine, Ont.

Critics in the U.S. and Canada argue to bury intermediate- and low-level nuclear waste so close to the shore of a major source of drinking water risks current and future generations.

U.S. Senator Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow have sent a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry expressing their concerns about storing nuclear waste along the shores of interna- tionally shared resource. They asked him to have the Inter- national Joint Committee, which monitors dis- putes about transboundary waters, also review the plan.

During the hearings, the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON) announced the nuclear waste site could not go ahead without its support. Chief Randall Kabigon called it a “buffer” proj- ect and said SON does not have a process or protocol for looking into the water table to pre- vent pollution.

Although the chief says SON is still early in the talks with the federal government, the panel will consider recommendations to the federal Minister of the Environment Levon Aglukkaq 90 days after receiving final written submissions.

Critics of the process argue it is impossible that millions of people are not even aware of the planning of the project, despite its implications for local, national and international secu- rity.

The joint review panel is con- sidering a proposal from Ontario Power Generation (OPG) to bury more than 200,000 cubic metres of low-level radioactive waste, for exam- ple, cleaning supplies and protective clothing but not used food.

The proposal includes 480 holes underground in a layer of limestone with a layer of shale above, which have been stable for over 450 million years. Early in the hearings, OPG revealed it might expand the site by another 11,400 cubic metres. Opponents urged the panel to adjust the hearings until OPG filled a complete plan, but the panel rejected that request.

The panel heard conflicting expert testimony.

Some claim this would be one of the most difficult scientific projects conceived in humanity’s history, while others say it is feasible.

One geologist compared pre- senting radiation from leak- ing into the water table to pre- venting the sun from rising in a swimming pool.

Others thought the process of building the shaft would not matter underground in a layer of limestone formations, which have been stable for over 450 million years.

Some suggested at least three other sites, above ground and deep in granite, should have been checked out first. OPG pur- portedly neglected to investigate alternative safe sites for the repository away from the Great Lakes basin.

The Canadian Environmental Law Association questioned whether using a spend got to Ontario would have received a more rigorous review.

Some worried about the tem- porary storage of multimillion- dollar costs for bringing in other countries’ intermediate- and low-level nuclear waste. Since U.S. President Barak Obama cancelled the Yucca mountain repository argued that the proj- ect was never properly accepted by the community. More differ- ent pricing tags were cited — from $1.3 million to $2.4 billion for the cost of construction and labour. The local Kincardine council has accepted the pro- posed plan but may not have known enough about the risks and costs.

Some local activists opposed to the project were visited by OPP officers in their homes, ostensibly to familiarize them with plates-clad officers in case of violent protest, but the activists perceived the visits as an intimidation tactic.

Meanwhile outsiders contrib- uted to worry, as the hearings ended, why fewer than 1,100 residents in a nine-mile community — transport waste to the site on public highways and railroads.

If burying the waste means it would be nigh impossible to ensure it is monitored and retrievable in the event of a nuclear accident at the Bruce site.

If in the future there is societal breakdown or economic col- lapes, human guardians would go unpaid, and the abandoned site will be forgotten and unmen- tioned.

Even if a widely acceptable and financially solvent solution to nuclear waste disposal is developed, pre- sums centuries into the future, the site will leave a radioactive legacy that must be passed on to future generations with full instructions.

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