

FALL 1999

Public tricked over plutonium shipment

Last Friday, despite years of protest, a small but deadly amount of weapons grade plutonium was trucked to the Canadian border at Sault Ste. Marie from Los Alamos, New Mexico.

The plutonium had been mixed with uranium to create a mixed oxide or MOX fuel. Its final destination was Atomic Energy Canada Limited's (AECL) facility at Chalk River, where it will be stored until a similar shipment arrives from Russia.

Once both shipments are in place, the fuel will be burned as part of an experiment to see if CANDU reactors can be used to help reduce the stockpile of plutonium from dismantled nuclear weapons left over from the Cold War.

The move has outraged the environmental community and the mayors on both sides of the border.

Since the plan was first announced, there has been significant concern about public safety. One Michigan group was even in the process of suing the U.S. Department of Energy in an attempt to stop the shipment altogether.

Local politicians were also anxious to see the shipments prevented. The mayor of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, 70-year-old Verna Lawrence, had vowed to lie down on the highway to block any shipments passing through her town. She didn't get the chance.

Last Friday, after the cargo had left their communities, both Mayor Lawrence and her Canadian counterpart, Mayor Steve Butland of Ste. Sault Marie, Ontario received phone calls to say that the deed had been done. The material had been shipped through their cities without any official notice to either mayor.

AECL spokesperson Larry Shewchuk arrogantly stated that officials were only informed on a "need-to-know" basis.

Once the plutonium crossed the border, Canadian officials decided not to use the original truck route, as planned.

Several protest groups — including two native bands — had vowed to block the highway. So instead the plutonium was shipped by helicopter to AECL's facility at Chalk River.

Flying the material by helicopter posed an even greater risk to public safety than using road transport. (Helicopters have the approximate glide path of a brick.)

Rather than being contrite about their clandestine operation, Shewchuk and his cohorts seemed pleased that everything had gone ahead against public and political will.

Because the operation was completed without incident, they assumed that the public had no right to be part of the process in the first place. But as Sault Ste. Marie mayor Steve Butland so

accurately put it, "People have a right to know." I agree.

The events of last Friday clearly indicate a fundamental arrogance that has permeated Canada's nuclear industry for decades. The assumption is that because the majority of us aren't fully qualified nuclear scientists, we are unqualified to judge all things nuclear.



But one does not have to be a nuclear scientist to be concerned about the impact of the technology on public health and safety. The onus of responsibility — which has never been assumed by AECL — is for the nuclear

community to explain the science in terms that the public can understand, and then allow the public to judge. That is our democratic right.

But that didn't happen last Friday. Instead a clandestine operation secretly avoided public outcry by sneaking behind the backs of local elected officials and simply going ahead with what they wanted to do anyway. This has set a precedent that I personally find quite frightening.

The voice of the people —

although very loud and very clear — was ignored on this issue.

This is a dangerous trend. A decade ago, the public voice was included as part of the decision making process. But that process became extremely expensive and protracted. Environmental assessment hearings often went on for years, costing the taxpayer millions of dollars and causing significant delays.

But just because something is proposed doesn't mean that it should go ahead because it's expedient to do so. Debate is inherent to the democratic process and that process must not be subverted. The public should always have the option of saying, "No."

Government agencies can't be allowed to only consider public opinion when it agrees with their own private agenda. Democracy is not politically convenient. Perhaps it's time we sent that message to Ottawa.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Write Prime Minister Jean Chretien, House of Commons, Ottawa, K1A 0A6 (no postage required) and demand to know why Atomic Energy Canada Limited (AECL) is being allowed to operate without public accountability.

Send your comments to Your Earth, c/o The Belleville Intelligencer, 45 Bridge St. E., Belleville, Ontario, K8N 5C7, or e-mail yourearth@tvo.org