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Enough is enough

The calm before the nuclear waste storm

By Charlene LaVoie

WINSTED

A RECENT Register Citizen headline encourages us to enjoy the calm before the nuclear waste storm. The federal government is shifting the burden of dealing with radioactive waste to the state. Connecticut must deal with the radioactive waste generated within its borders by building a radioactive waste storage facility. Fierce public opposition is expected, due to "mistaken impressions about radioactivity."

Radioactive waste presents a two-prong problem for Connecticut. The first involves the siting of a low-level radioactive waste storage site somewhere in Connecticut. The federal government requires that each state provide for the storage of low-level radioactive waste generated within its borders. Any state which does not provide for storage of its own radioactive waste will be denied access to the federal dump sites, due to close soon because they are full. Connecticut currently ships its low-level radioactive waste to South Carolina.

The second is the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) policy which deregulates heretofore regulated radioactive waste and labels it below regulatory concern, or BRC. This policy permits BRC waste to be disposed of in the solid waste stream, i.e. landfills and incinerators. The BRC policy reduces the amount of low-level radioactive waste required to be stored at the storage site and increases the amount of radioactive material exposed to humans.

Radioactive waste is basically comprised of high-level waste, such as the fuel rods in a nuclear reactor, and low-level waste which is everything else. The federal government, through such agencies as the NRC, has historically regulated the low-level radioactive waste and other nuclear activity in this country including the licensing of facilities, waste storage and acceptable levels of radioactivity for workers, citizens and the environment; the states have had no input into the regulation of nuclear activity.

Facing growing amounts of radioactive garbage after several decades of nuclear power and the lack of safe storage sites, the federal government has shifted the problem to the states and at the same time continued to preempt state regulation of the area. Connecticut legislators have introduced a bill to prohibit BRC in this state. Winsted and other communities have already banned BRC. BRC waste can be thrown into landfills, incinerated, and recycled into consumer products. In addition, the policy permits the unrestricted use of the land and buildings at nuclear reactor sites! Great places for elderly housing or a children's museum.

The NRC policy deregulates previously regulated low-level radioactive waste and calls it below regulatory concern. But low-level does not mean low risk.

A National Research Council study showed that low-level radiation is three to four times more carcinogenic than previously estimated. There is no dispute about the cumulative adverse impact of radioactivity. Even the NRC acknowledges that the BRC policy could have the effect of causing additional cancer deaths.

The NRC admits that its decision is based, in part, on economic considerations. The nuclear power industry, which has four nuclear reactors in Connecticut and generates 70 percent by volume of all the low-level radioactive waste, stands to gain the most from the policy change.

Connecticut's reactors are scheduled to be decommissioned within the next two decades which means disassembling the entire power plant. All of the material from a decommissioned reactor is radioactive and will be either tossed into the landfill or stored forever at a low-level radioactive waste dump in your neighborhood.

The nuclear industry will save big money at the taxpayers' expense. The cost savings to the industry, however, does not translate into a cost savings for us as consumers of energy since we will pay the costs of storing the waste in the facility and for the eventual environmental costs of radioactive waste disposed of in the solid waste stream. This it cost shifting rather than cost savings.

Yet the nuclear industry relentlessly promotes the idea that nuclear energy is clean, safe, inexpensive and efficient. This position is completely dishonest in light of the radioactive waste storage problems and expense, numerous reactor and waste transport accidents, increased risks to humans from exposure to radioactivity and the resultant cost to all of us, environmentally and monetarily.

Public Citizen, the state of Connecticut, 16 other states and other citizen groups are participating in a lawsuit which challenges the NRC policy of deregulating radioactive waste. The states recognize that the BRC policy trades people's lives and the environment in favor of the financial interests of the nuclear industry.

It is time for citizens to say enough is enough nuclear energy is not cheap, clean or safe. It is costly and hazardous to us, our environment, and future generations.

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