

ENVIRONMENT

That may include even the people at the Connecticut Hazardous Waste Management Service. "It makes no economic, no environmental, no political sense for us to have this facility in Connecticut," says Joe Cohen, spokesman for the CHWMS. "But the fact is that we have to do it." By federal law, Connecticut must have a low-level facility in operation by 1996, or assume all financial liability for the waste. And unless the state moves fast, it may not reach that goal.

As the state learns to grapple with this new issue, certain questions seem to be in order. First, what exactly is low-level radioactive waste, and how much of it is there in Connecticut? Second, how much will it cost to store the material? Third, and perhaps most difficult, how will the state convince any town selected for the site that it was chosen objectively rather than for political reasons? Finally and most importantly, what danger to human health and the environment does the material pose, and can it really be disposed of safely?

Low-level waste is defined not by what it is, but what it isn't, a distinction made clear by looking into the blue pool at Millstone. The control-rod blades aren't the only things cooling off in the water there. Tucked into the far corner of the large, L-shaped pool are the plant's used fuel rods, the zirconium-alloy tubes that hold the reactor's spent nuclear fuel. Those rods, and waste created from nuclear weapons, are called "high-level" waste; it will be stored on-site until a federal waste-disposal facility is built. But all the other radioactive material produced in Connecticut, from elements in home smoke alarms, to the gloves and booties used in nuclear power plants and labs, to the control-rod blades stored in the pool—is considered "low-level," regardless of how radioactive it is.

"People need to be much more up-front about this issue, call things as they really are," says Charlene LaVoie, a lawyer in Winsted who has studied low-level waste for that community. "You can call it 'low-level' if you want, but it's not—it's very dangerous. People say we need the [waste] facility so that hospitals and research labs can keep on doing their good work, but that is just a ruse, a decoy. It's the power plants that make the stuff."

Of the approximately 45,000 cubic feet of low-level waste that Connecticut creates each year (enough to fill 13 tractor trailers), about 30 percent *does* come from the state's 22 hospitals, universities, and industries that use radioactive materials. But 70 percent of the low-level waste—and more significantly, 99.9 percent of the radioactivity—comes from the state's four nuclear power plants. The control-rod blades shipped out of state in 1988, while only 140 cubic feet, accounted for over 97 percent of the state's low-level radioactivity that year.