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Following the Path Backward:Introduction

A response to the NWMO Report on the Management of High level Nuclear waste in Canada

Irradiated nuclear fuel has been produced in Canada since 1945. Once created, this highly radioactive material remains dangerous for millions of years. It cannot be destroyed or made harmless by any available method. It can only be stored and guarded in perpetuity.Failure of containment can have catastrophic results.

For thirty years Ð from 1945 until 1975 Ð the nuclear industry made no effort to alert Canadians to the problems of safeguarding this extraordinarily toxic material in perpetuity. That has changed. The industry now sees the long-term management of irradiated nuclear fuel as a serious problem -- not on a technical level, but in the sphere of public relations. For if nuclear wastes are perceived to be an unsolved problem, opposition to nuclear power will grow, and the nuclear industry's future will be in jeopardy.

In the spring of 2005, a group created by the nuclear industry issued a draft report on the long-term management of Canada's irradiated

nuclear fuel. This group, the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO), called their report "Choosing a Way Forward." The "choosing" referred to is not their own, they claim, but the Canadian public's; for NWMO maintains its conclusions and recommendations are crafted from what ordinary Canadians think they would like to see happen with irradiated nuclear fuel. NWMO bases its claim on how selected people responded to NWMO presentations at meetings arranged by NWMO.

Our critique is entitled "Following the Path Backward" because we believe the NWMO process has not been designed to stimulate informed choice through genuine consultation, but to manoeuvre people into accepting an agenda first laid down by the nuclear industry over twenty-five years ago.

The industry's agenda is not to eliminate nuclear fuel wastes but to make the continued production of these wastes publicly acceptable. To achieve this, the industry needs to convince the public that irradiated nuclear fuel can be safely disposed of once and for all, even though industry plans point in the opposite direction: the continued accumulation and accelerated production of these long-lived toxic materials.

Accordingly, NWMO avoided asking people whether Canada should continue producing irradiated nuclear fuel; people were asked simply where they think the existing and anticipated wastes should be stored. Would people like to (a) leave the irradiated fuel wastes where they are now, or (b) move them to one central site, or (c) bury them deep underground in rock formations?

When pressured to select one of these three options, or to formulate an entirely new strategy for storing nuclear fuel wastes somewhere else, people are understandably puzzled. Why are agents of the industry asking ordinary Canadians, who know little about the subject, what should be done with the industry's most toxic waste byproducts? Doesn't the industry know what to do? What exactly is the point of the exercise?

As the NWMO Report reveals, the three options offered to Canadians are in fact merely three phases of a single option, and that option is the strategy selected by the nuclear industry over thirty years ago: burial of irradiated fuel deep underground. On-site storage is the status quo, and it is inescapable for a period of time in any event; centralized storage is the next phase, needed in preparation for the third phase: deep burial.

No matter which phase of the deep burial strategy is chosen by Canadians, the industry scores a major public relations victory by making it seem that people are willing to accept nuclear power provided the wastes are handled in a specified manner. Choosing one of NWMO's options can easily be misconstrued as a vote of approval for nuclear power. The industry can then expand and do what it wants with the waste, claiming that it is simply carrying out the public's will..

But is there in fact a proven safe method for storing irradiated fuel for millions of years? Do Canadians really want to continue producing these wastes? Were Canadians lied to by the industry when told that nuclear power is "clean energy"? These questions of policy choice and accountability are marginalized and trivialized by the NWMO process.

The lessons of the past have not been learned. The 1977 Hare Report laid out the geologic disposal concept of Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. (AECL), but emphasized that the safety of this concept has to be "validated". The 1978 Report of the Ontario Royal Commission on Electric Power Planning, A Race Against Time, recommended a moratorium on nuclear power unless at least one safe method of waste storage for millennia can be demonstrated. The 1998 Seaborn Panel Report found that geologic disposal should be studied further. but that it should not now be accepted as Canada's policy because it is not publicly acceptable and the safety of the concept is not established in all respects.

The concept remains unproven. Science can't predict long-term futures. The Ontario Royal

Commission on Electric Power Planning warned that the industry insistence on centralized storage is inextricably linked with industry plans for advanced fuel cycles based on plutonium recycling.

This warning has gone unheeded. NWMO obscures the issue entirely. Most importantly, recommendations to create agencies "at arm's length" (i.e. independent) from the industry have been totally disregarded. The Board Members of NWMO are the corporations that produce the waste.

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