

Why Did Manitoba Ban Nuclear Wastes...Over Two Decades Ago?

By Jim Harding

The quest for a nuclear dump began in 1977 when the town of Madoc, Ontario was targeted for geological research by the Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd (AECL). Stealth-like secrecy was their strategy; until a story in *Harrowsmith* revealed that 16,000 acres of nearby crown land had been put into reserve. The AECL had to move north, near Atikokan, Ontario, to start test drilling. When locals got wind of this, the newly formed Citizens Committee for Nuclear Responsibility quickly collected 1,700 names opposing AECL's activities, which was more than voted in their last local election.

The AECL relocated to its Whiteshell Nuclear Research Establishment (WNRE) at Pinawa, Manitoba. Some local residents were already dependent on AECL employment, and the federal corporation cajoled backroom support for its waste research from the RM of Lac du Bonnet, targeted for its pre-Cambrian granite. A letter to the local paper in 1980 speculating a nuclear dump was in the works, led to the formation of the Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC). The CCC drew 150 people to its first public meeting which, in spite of obstruction from AECL staff, endorsed public hearings into AECL's plans. Soon the CCC was receiving unmarked envelopes; the first containing a secret 1977 report, "*Radioactive Waste Repository Study, Part I*", laying out the requirements for an underground waste repository, including "retrievability" of spent fuel for future reprocessing. Later the CCC found an underground facility and injection of radioactive tracers into the rock was in the works.

Neither federal, Liberal Energy Minister, Marc LaLonde, nor Conservative Premier, Sterling Lyons, would support public hearings; though Corporate Affairs Minister, and future Manitoba Premier, Gary Filmon, seemed sympathetic. The CCC continued with local action, and George Ylonen, who first exposed the nuclear dump, got elected as Reeve in the targeted RM. The CCC pressed for independent monitoring of the AECL, getting a sympathetic hearing from the newly-elected Pawley NDP government in early 1982. Once the province agreed, the RM couldn't really say "no!", and local residents got their foot in "the nuclear door."

Already irked by noise, dust and potholes in their recreational retreat, Winnipeg cottagers became sympathetic to the CCC. Ironically, one of the first cottagers involved was a retiree, Walter Robbins, who, having once worked in the US Atomic Energy Commissions' personnel department, knew well the secretive-closed workings of the nuclear establishment. (In 1984 he published a tell-it-all book, "***Getting The Shaft: The Radioactive Waste Controversy in Manitoba***".) A leaked report, showing unacceptable levels of radioactivity in the Winnipeg River; and, after provincial monitoring started, in drinking water samples, catapulted public involvement. When the first international conference on nuclear waste storage was held in Winnipeg, in 1983, and media speculated that Manitoba might become the world first "atomic funeral home", the broader electorate began to

awaken.

AECL's Research Station was at the west entrance to Whiteshell Provincial Park. Though the AECL could bribe or intimidate some residents through jobs, the area's primary economy was tourism. After becoming Minister of Energy in Mulroney's government, MP for the area, Jake Epp, enlarged AECL's subsidies and tried in vain to keep the nuclear waste project alive. However, in July 1987, under growing public pressure, the Pawley NDP government passed *The High-Level Radioactive Waste Act*. At first it seemed to provide loopholes, e.g. not allowing "facilities for the storage of spent nuclear fuel, not intended for research purposes, that was produced...outside Manitoba"; and not providing "interim storage, for more than 7 days, for spent nuclear fuel that was produced...outside Manitoba." It, however, clearly states, "**No person shall provide facilities for the disposal of high-level radioactive wastes in Manitoba**", and carries penalties up to \$1,000,000 a day and/or 12 months in jail for any corporation or directors involved.

The AECL was again sent packing. It tried to quietly return to Ontario, but was rebuffed by residents at New Liskard and Massey. It finally had to take its proposal into federal hearings, from 1991-1998, which concluded Canadians didn't support deep geological burial of nuclear wastes. The Chretien Liberals then created the industry-based Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO), which, in 2005, started promoting the same thing the AECL had previously secretly pursued, and public hearings refused to endorse. While the NWMO says several provinces "qualify" for a nuclear dump, Quebec, like Manitoba, has now banned importing nuclear wastes. And you can bet that New Brunswick isn't going to take the 40,000 tonnes of accumulated high-level wastes, mostly in Ontario. So, the nuclear industry hopes Saskatchewan will be the last stop on its march across the Canadian Shield. Cameco and the AECL began promoting Saskatchewan as a nuclear dump in 1991. Since then, much behind-the-scenes, money-induced promotion has occurred with business, municipal and Indigenous groups. This year the plan came public when the Uranium Development Partnership (UDP) endorsed Saskatchewan taking nuclear wastes as part of its nuclear industry expansion plan.

When it was revealed what the AECL had in store for eastern Manitoba, some cottagers asked why this "wasn't being done in some remote area", some place with "no people around." There's really no such place, and these are "code words" for the far north where mostly Indigenous people live. But the nuclear industry was listening, and the NWMO now targets First Nations and Métis communities, which it may think will be less resistant to economic bribery than people from Madoc, Atikokan, Lac du Bonnet, New Liskard or Massey. It's surprising that Indigenous organizations here haven't yet come out adamantly against the idea of disposing of nuclear wastes on Treaty lands, or land still under dispute, as has happened elsewhere. And if any southerners think a nuclear waste dump in the north is a "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" solution, they should imagine thousands of truck-loads of high-level wastes coming endlessly through their villages, towns and cities.

Winoa LaDuke reminded people, when she recently spoke to a Saskatoon rally

supporting renewable energy, that with the US nuclear dump abandoned at Yucca, Nevada, and “free trade” between our countries, there’s 90,000 shipments of radioactive wastes waiting across the border. All in all, following the path of our Manitoba neighbours and legislatively banning nuclear wastes in Saskatchewan seems a wise, overdue idea, for us and our grandchildren. Both major parties now need to be encouraged to do the right thing.