

FLASH SHEET # 6 - Gracia Janes Environment Convener April 5, 2003

In February's Flash Sheet, I warned of the looming threat of proposed mega-projects which are being offered as a panacea to energy shortages, and to reduce global warming gases i.e. nuclear plants and dams in Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador. This month I bring you an update on both issues.

Rupert River Diversion/Churchill Falls Dam Projects

While Newfoundland's Churchill Falls project is generating considerable controversy, with "two senior executives of the province's power utility (having) resigned their posts after voting against a plan to build a \$4 billion hydroelectric dam in Labrador," Quebec Hydro's much more potentially devastating plans to dam the Rupert River, remain a non issue in the current election campaign, and are just beginning to feel the heat at evidence being presented in the lead up to the joint federal/provincial Environmental Assessment. This is quite shocking, given that not only is the Rupert River "one of the last great virgin rivers of North America" **1.**, but also that, according to Martin Von Mirbach, Director of Forests and Bio-diversity for the Sierra Club of Canada, the flooding of 950 square kilometers, would result in a greater loss of forests than the collective forest loss across Canada, for at least the next ten years. **2.**

Nuclear Waste Disposal

The Achilles heel of the nuclear industry and the cabal of "experts" who promote nuclear as a "safe, clean, leading edge, greenhouse gas -free" method of producing much needed energy, is the disposal of both low level (eg. tailings from uranium mines) and high level (used uranium from nuclear reactors) nuclear waste. Nuclear fuel waste, as we know, "consists of hundreds of different by-products, including very hazardous radioactive substances which must be isolated for millions of years to protect all living things." **3**

It is these high level nuclear wastes that have, as of October 24, come under the purview of a Federally appointed Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO), chaired by Elizabeth Dowdswell, which will oversee "an extensive public consultation process and a thorough study of long-term waste management approaches." **4.** Her organization will be advised by a Nuclear Waste Management Advisory Council (NWMAC). Both will be responsive to the Nuclear Fuel Waste Act, Bill C-27, which became law on April 25th 2001, after much opposition from aboriginal, community, environmental and church groups.

Joining these many knowledgeable groups, were some members of the original Seaborn panel, which held 10 years of public hearings on the disposal of high level nuclear waste, and to whom, NCWC and PCWO made presentations in 1997 and 1998. We were pleased at the outcome, whereby the Panel determined:

*The public "had a sense of grave unease" **5.** regarding AECL's plan to bury it in the Precambrian Shield

"* The Aboriginal peoples had not been properly consulted, and there needed to be an Aboriginal process designed by Aboriginal people

* A comprehensive public participation program and an ethical and social assessment framework for each should be developed.

* The many flaws in the design should be remedied

* An independent agency be formed at arms length from AECL and the nuclear utilities in order to manage the programs related to long-term nuclear fuel waste management, including detailed comparison of waste management options, and that it be subject to "**multiple oversights**", meaning that **there be a variety of means for the public and the government to monitor and oversee the Agency's activities and programs..**" **6**

Bill C- 27 will not meet the high standards of the Seaborn Panel as evidenced by the 'industry -only' Nuclear Waste Management Organization,(NWMO) chaired by a person with strong ties to the industry (eg. Ms. Dowdswell is, as of February 2000, a Board member of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor

(ITER) 7.. **This is indeed rather like putting the chickens in the care of the fox.**

And, according to those environmentalists who have been involved in this issue for years, although some of the members of the Advisory Committee are “ individuals of seeming independence”, some have well known views supporting the original concept of burying the waste in the Precambrian Shield, and some are already expressing views that lean towards what appears to be this predetermined option.

In this light, it is very disturbing, that the November 2005 deadline for the NWBO to advise the federal government on a plan of action is fast approaching, and the public have yet to be properly engaged. It is even more worrisome that in a recent Toronto Star article, that stressed the role of the seemingly uninformed public, Ms Dowdswell is quoted as saying “ **a solution to the disposal problem has eluded Canada despite decades of scientific and technical research,**” but then, is quoted as telling the annual meeting of the Canadian Nuclear Association “ **the agency was planning an extensive citizen engagement process, relying heavily on its web site.**” 8.

Her agency also reported to Government MPs recently, that “ when Canadians in seven cities were asked about nuclear waste, **they were so ill-informed they couldn't discuss disposal options intelligently.**” Yet, according to the Star news article, the public raised the very issues NCWC and other well versed environmental, and Native groups have in the past, such as “ **the contradictory role of the federal government which promotes nuclear energy with large subsidies and will make the final choice about the disposal option recommended by the waste control agency.**”⁹. **Right on the mark, I would say!** Unfortunately, according to the NWBO survey, the public would prefer to “ hand the waste decision over to some sort of ‘arms length ‘ waste control agency.” **Little does the public know the ‘short’ length of the arm.** Please tune in to these web sites to follow the issue and have your say:

<http://www.web.ca/~nwatch/> - Northwatch is the regional coalition of environmental and citizen organizations and individual members in northeastern Ontario

<http://www.nfwbureau.gc.ca/> - Nuclear Fuel Waste Bureau - The objective of the *Nuclear Fuel Waste Act* is to ensure that the long-term management of nuclear fuel waste will be carried out in a comprehensive, integrated and economically-sound manner.

<http://www.nrdc.org/> - Natural Resource Defense Council - The Earth's Best Defense

References:

1. Radio Netherlands: The battle for the Rupert. The Rivers Section. August 5th, 2002.
2. personal communication. Dr. John Bacher. April 4/2003 report re: Ontario Environment Network Spring Conference. March 2003.
3. Nuclear Fuel Waste Act Comes into Force. Nuclear Notes. Issue One .Volume One. November 2002. Northwatch.
4. ibid.
5. PCWO Brief to the Nuclear Fuel Waste Management & disposal concept Environmental Assessment Panel (Seaborne Panel) Phase 111 Hearings. G.Janes. For PCWO..February 26, 1997.
6. Nuclear Fuel Waste Act Bill C-27 Becomes Law. Nuclear Notes. Issue One. Volume One. November 2002. Northwatch.
7. ibid.
8. Canadians uniformed about nuclear waste. Peter Calami. Toronto Star. April 1, 2003.
9. ibid.