

Opposition to Highly Radioactive Liquid Shipments Continues

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In spite of a disappointing ruling by a US Judge on Thursday afternoon, February 2, public opposition remains to an unprecedented plan to ship 23,000 litres (6000 gallons) of intensely radioactive liquid from Chalk River, Ontario, to the Savannah River Site in South Carolina – a distance of over 2000 kilometres. The liquid is an acidic solution of dozens of extremely radiotoxic materials such as cesium-137, strontium-90, and plutonium-239.

The first armed convoy, in a series of 100-150 truckloads over a period of four years, had been put on hold pending the outcome of a legal challenge in US federal court. Plaintiffs had urged the court to either suspend the shipments, or to require a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement in compliance with US environmental law (NEPA), because such highly radioactive material has never before been transported over public roads in liquid form.

But on February 2 the court ruled against the Plaintiffs, deferring to the Department of Energy's 2013 and 2015 claims that the transport of this dangerous waste in liquid form poses no more dangers than hauling it in solid form. So now, these unprecedented highly radioactive liquid waste shipments have been judged to have no legal obstacles, even without an EIS. Consequences of a spill and discussion of alternatives will not be available for scrutiny by the public or other agencies as a result of the ruling.

The suit was brought by seven US organizations: *Beyond Nuclear, Nuclear Information and Resource Service, Savannah River Site Watch, Citizens for Alternatives to Chemical Contamination, Lone Tree Council, Sierra Club* and *Environmentalists, Inc.* Dozens of other organizations on both sides of the border support the plaintiffs in their opposition. All these groups will continue to challenge the plan to transport such dangerous liquid over public roads and bridges – a feat never before attempted, and one they consider to be entirely unnecessary as there are safer alternatives.

Tom Clements, director of Savannah River Site Watch in South Carolina, said “Citizens here don't want to be a dumping ground for Canada's nuclear waste. Last year, Indonesia demonstrated a method called 'down-blending', carried out with DOE approval, that eradicates any need for shipping highly radioactive liquid. The same technique can be utilized at Chalk River. Down-blending and solidifying the waste in Canada would be cheaper, faster and safer than moving this dangerous liquid cargo through dozens of communities, then processing and dumping it into aging waste tanks at SRS.”

Gordon Edwards, Ph.D., a mathematician with the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility, and Marvin Resnikoff, Ph.D., a physicist with the US-based Nuclear Waste Management Associates, both filed technical declarations in support of the lawsuit.

Dr. Edwards' declaration based on published data from the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission and the US Environmental Protection Agency, showed that the toxicity of a few ounces of the Chalk River liquid would ruin an entire city's water supply. “This liquid is among the most radiotoxic materials on earth,” said Dr. Edwards.

Dr. Resnikoff's statement pointed out that a severe sideways impact of the transport cask, or a prolonged diesel fire causing boiling of the liquid and over-pressure rupture of the containers, could spill the liquid contents into the environment. “The consequences of such realistic accident scenarios have not been adequately assessed,” said Dr. Resnikoff, adding that the containers have never been tested physically under such realistic conditions. The Judge disallowed the two expert declarations.

Mary Olson, one of the plaintiffs in the law suit, said “Even without any leakage of the contents, people will be exposed to penetrating gamma radiation and damaging neutron radiation just by sitting in traffic beside one of these transport trucks. And because the liquid contains weapons-grade uranium there is an ever-present possibility of a spontaneous chain reaction giving off a powerful blast of life-threatening neutrons in all directions – a so-called “criticality” accident.”

For further information:

*Gordon Edwards, CCNR, (514) 839-7214
Tom Clements, SRSW, (803) 834-3084
Terry J. Lodge, plaintiffs' co-counsel, (419) 205-7084*

*Mary Olson, NIRS, (828) 242-5621
Marvin Resnikoff, RWMA, (917) 549-8231*