

Nuclear Waste: Contaminating Recycled Materials

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Background:

Once upon a time, people were told that nuclear power is "clean". Having been taught in school that Science is Truth and Scientists are therefore to be trusted, people generally believed what they were told.

In those days, the population and their elected representatives were assured that nuclear waste would be safely sequestered from the environment of living things. They were reassured. Everything was well in hand.

That was then. This is now.

We are now deep into the Age of Nuclear Waste. The nuclear establishment is bending every rule it can to be allowed to disperse huge volumes of its radioactive waste byproducts into the environment (e.g. landfills) or into consumer goods (e.g. scrap metal).

Nuclear advocates call it "recycling of radioactively contaminated materials", but this is a misnomer designed to deceive. For nobody -- absolutely nobody -- wants radioactively contaminated materials. There is no market, for example, for radioactively contaminated scrap metal. None whatsoever.

These schemers are not "recycling" contaminated material at all; what they are doing (or wanting to do) is systematically contaminating recycled material!

They are blending highly toxic radioactive poisons -- unwanted waste byproducts that are created in the bowels of nuclear reactors and do not otherwise exist in nature -- into what is otherwise wholesome, environmentally friendly products.

The result is that every person on earth may soon end up with small amounts of nuclear reactor waste in most household products: knives, forks, zippers, pins, buckles, baby cribs -- you name it. And this systematic contamination would not be due to some nuclear disaster such as the Fukushima catastrophe, but due to a deliberate policy on the part of government decision-makers.

The baffling comparisons that are made by the nuclear polluters are bogus. They talk about radiation exposures from transcontinental flights, or exposures from medical x-rays -- but such exposures do not leave a deposit of long-lived radioactive material in the environment.

Plutonium has a half-life of 24,000 years. Therefore, if it is blended into our metal supply, it will remain in the environment for a period of time that far exceeds the span of recorded human history, exposing present and future generations to an extraordinary toxic radioactive material that is only created as a waste byproduct from nuclear reactors.

Once disseminated into the environment it can never be removed again.

Now is the time for people in large numbers to say "No!" to this irresponsible plan.

Gordon Edwards. [See http://www.ccnr.org/essay_radwaste_recycling.pdf]

Scrap-Metal Plan Proves Radioactive

By JOHN R. EMSHWILLER, *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2013

<http://tinyurl.com/b3tugyp>

The Department of Energy is proposing to allow the sale of tons of scrap metal from government nuclear sites—an attempt to reduce waste that critics say could lead to radiation-tainted belt buckles, surgical implants and other consumer products.

The department, in a document released last month, said the recycling proposal is in line with its policy of "reusing materials whenever possible." The approximately 14,000 tons of metal under review for possible initial release is only a fraction of the tens of millions of tons of metal recycled annually, it said.

Smaller amounts could be eligible for release in future years. Selling the metals could bring in \$10 million to \$40 million a year, the DOE estimates. While the metal would come from "radiological areas" such as research laboratories and nuclear-weapons-related facilities, any contamination would be so low that a member of the public would be exposed to a "negligible individual dose" of additional radiation, the DOE said. The allowable annual radiation dose to an individual from a given shipment of the scrap metal would be half the estimated amount of radiation a person gets flying cross-country, or even less, the document said.

Some industry and environmental groups aren't satisfied by the government's assurances.

"We are concerned about what could happen in the marketplace if you have to worry about radioactive material possibly being in your eyeglass frames," said Thomas Danjczek, president of the Steel Manufacturers Association, a trade group whose members use recycled metals. "Why is the government trying to hurt the image of American products?"

It is difficult and expensive to prevent the commingling of recycled metals. Metal processing facilities already face contamination problems when they inadvertently accept medical devices and other radioactive products, Mr. Danjczek said. Cleanup from such incidents can cost a recycling plant as much as \$15 million, he added.

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Some critics argue the DOE's proposed exposure standards are too high and that information provided in its 50-page document explaining the proposal is even more worrisome.

Higher exposures could occur if contaminated metal is made into items such as belt buckles or hip-replacement joints, said Daniel Hirsch, a lecturer on nuclear policy at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and critic of the government's proposal. Such exposures would further increase a person's cancer risk, he said.

On Friday, Rep. Ed Markey wrote to Energy Secretary Steven Chu, calling the recycling proposal "unwise" and stating the proposal "should be immediately abandoned." The Massachusetts Democrat added that contaminated products could "ultimately be utilized by pregnant women, children and other vulnerable populations."

A DOE spokesman said procedures for clearing the metals for sale are designed to ensure the materials don't cause problems for industry. He disputed the claims that the metals could possibly cause higher radiation exposures to individuals. The DOE is preparing a response to Mr. Markey, he added.

The current DOE proposal is the latest development in a decades long dispute over what to do with waste from the nuclear industry. Government facilities for producing nuclear weapons and conducting other atomic work have generated large amounts of waste, ranging from highly radioactive to clean.

A 1981 Wall Street Journal article chronicled an earlier debate over a similar government plan to sell metal. The proposal drew more than 3,000 written responses, almost all in opposition. One writer suggested government officials "just eat your radioactive waste," while another called it "one of the more outrageous ideas to come out of idiotic bureaucrats."

The government recycled some metal from its nuclear sites from the 1990s to mid-2000. The release of about 3,000 tons from a Tennessee facility prompted a report in 2000 from the DOE's inspector general that said inadequate testing "increased risk to the public." A test on one unreleased batch showed a radioactivity level several times the allowed limits, the report said.

In 2000, then-Energy Secretary Bill Richardson suspended such metal shipments. He added there wasn't evidence of public harm from prior releases. The pending proposal says the department has improved its methods since 2000 and that recycling the materials "would be a benefit to the environment." The DOE said the sites with the largest amounts of the metal are the Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York and Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Illinois.

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