



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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## Should Manitobans trust nuclear burial plans?

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**T**here was a time when a plan to bury highly radioactive materials 500m from a river that provides drinking water and flows into Lake Winnipeg, would have attracted a fair bit of attention in Manitoba. Maybe even a mild uproar. One imagines the provincial government at least would have had something to say about it.

So how is it that this scenario seems destined to unfold – soon – and there is scarcely a murmur to be heard in the public sphere? What has changed?

A few things, as it turns out. First, when the WR-1 Research reactor was built in Pinawa in 1963, the agreement between the federal government (responsible for most nuclear matters) and the Province of Manitoba was that at the end of the reactor's life, the site would be restored to "green field" (ie. natural) conditions. The original license to "decommission" the reactor planned exactly that: (the spent fuel having already been moved), the reactor would be completely dismantled and its remaining radioactive inventory, consisting mostly of contaminated reactor parts, taken off-site to await "disposal" in whatever Canada's final nuclear waste solution was going to be. Notwithstanding the residual contamination remaining from the multiple accidents and leaks this reactor experienced, the "green field" promise would be honoured.

Now however, Canada wants out of the original agreement and instead prefers "in-situ decommissioning", (ISD) a proposal which leaves all the (non-spent fuel)

radioactive inventory (some of which will remain deadly for tens of thousands of years) grouted in place in a shallow grave next to the Winnipeg River. This new "project" is now subject to another environmental assessment and licensing process.

Second, the original proponent of the reactor decommissioning was Atomic Energy of Canada, Limited (AECL) a federal Crown Corporation, and "owner" of the nuclear waste that the WR-1 Reactor now constitutes. But that has changed too. The new proponent is Canadian Nuclear Labs (CNL), a consortium of multi-nationals, including SNC Lavalin, Mitsubishi, Fluor Corp, Rolls Royce and CH2M HILL, to whom the Federal Government has given the responsibility for "reducing Canada's nuclear waste liabilities" with a reward of billions of taxpayers dollars. A quick Google search on consortium members turns up multiple international scandals and charges, some of which involve breaches of nuclear safety. None of the now-retired nuclear scientists who live in Pinawa, and who know the reactor and the site well, were consulted by CNL for the new plan, and are, incidentally, highly critical of it.

Third, the regulatory environment has changed. The Harper government's changes to Environmental Assessment legislation placed responsibility for the safety and soundness of nuclear plans in the hands of the regulator, the

there is an alternative.

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Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, sometimes referred to as a “captured regulator” due to its cozy relationship with nuclear proponents. CNSC has never actually denied a nuclear reactor license, demonstrably does not understand the planning necessary for sound environmental assessment, and moreover, its decisions may not be overturned by government. It’s hardly comforting to know that in nuclear matters, Canada is now reputed to have a “benign regulatory environment” according to the World Nuclear News. In other words, bring your nuclear business here, we won’t be watching you very carefully!

Fourth, governments have changed, of course. Here in Manitoba, the Conservatives seem blissfully unconcerned about the new plans for Pinawa. In Ottawa, the Liberals are working towards repairing Mr. Harper’s damage to environmental assessment, but seem reluctant to extend their amendments to the nuclear situation. Instead, we are encouraged by the Minister of Natural Resources Jim Carr (ironically, the senior minister from Manitoba) to trust the regulator and join him in believing that CNSC would never make a decision that would risk the health and safety of Canadians. This, despite the fact that in-situ decommissioning is not international best practice, that it has never been used in Canada, and that CNL’s current environmental assessment is beset with really significant problems including not proving that ISD is the safest option for people and the environment, and failing to account properly for the concerns of indigenous Canadians.

Some things don’t change, such as successive Canadian governments’ cheerleading for the nuclear industry, and perhaps worse, the continued absence of a coherent policy to deal with the stockpile of nuclear waste – including spent fuel, contaminated reactor components and uranium mine tailings – that continues to accumulate across the country. Instead we are being asked to trust in ad-hoc and unproven schemes to render our nuclear liabilities temporarily invisible. And that’s

a real problem, because something else that hasn’t changed is the profound danger of these materials to human health and ecosystems when (not if) they become mobile in the environment.

Manitobans should not be guinea pigs for this particularly inappropriate and precedent setting proposal.

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