

12th Annual Youth Outdoor Wellness Conference

Northwest Saskatchewan

August 3, 2005

Youth Dialogue Report

Preamble

Approximately 200 youth from northwest Saskatchewan took part in the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) dialogue, at the 12th Annual Outdoor Youth Wellness Conference, August 3, 2005. The presentation by Dr. Tony Hodge began with special thanks to the Ile a la Crosse Friendship Centre for hosting the conference, and presentation of a cheque from the NWMO to assist with expenses. The presentation was well received by the youth, with hearty applause and much cheering. Dr. Hodge acknowledged dignitaries present, including Max Morin, Mayor of Ile a la Crosse; President Don Favel and Senator Jim Favel of the Sakitawak Métis Nation.

The first part of the presentation was made under the main big top on a cloudy, windy day, to a mixed group of youth from 14-18 years of age. While several youth struggled to find a good reason to sit still and listen, many more strained to hear. Dr. Hodge pointed out a popular, role model Northerner in the crowd, himself employed by Cameco Corporation, just to help youth make the connection between Saskatchewan uranium mining and the whole nuclear energy cycle.

Even the most restless youth were drawn into dialogue when the fuel bundle was offered for handling; appreciating a rare opportunity to connect with the nuclear energy cycle and ponder its potential impact on their lives. The fuel bundle was likened to a battery cell, as it would be used to generate heat and eventually electricity in a nuclear reactor. Dr. Hodge explained that these fuel bundles would become too hot and too dangerous to handle after being used in the nuclear reactors. In fact, the bundles would be dangerously hot and radioactive for hundreds of years in the future. The youth were amazed at this time frame, and wrestled with the concept of planning for serious events beyond their own lifespan.

Dr. Hodge explained that the NWMO has been involved in dialogue with all kinds of people, from all over Canada on the best alternatives for storing used nuclear fuel. Based on the input of Canadians, the NWMO has now come up with a draft recommendation, and needs to hear from Canadians again. The youth were asked to respond to two questions, 1) How do you feel about nuclear waste and its potential impact on your life? 2) How do you feel about the NWMO's

recommended approach (Phased Adaptive Management) for storing the used nuclear fuel?

An "open-mike" session of questions and answers followed the presentation by Dr. Hodge. The first question came from an unidentified, older, non-Aboriginal man from the "South". He voiced concern about nuclear waste being dumped in Northern Saskatchewan, and warned the youth not to trust the government (NWMO/Dr. Hodge). The man went on to say that people like Dr. Hodge just want to take away Aboriginal land and dump their waste in the North. There were very few other questions asked in the large group setting, so the facilitators circulated among the crowd chatting with groups of 4-6 youth. The smaller group dynamics made all the difference, as the youth became quite candid with their responses.

In the afternoon session, the large group was split into four and sent off with facilitators for small group discussion and individual writing exercises, in response to the presentation.

Summary of Responses

The questions were put forward in simple terms –1) How do you feel about nuclear waste/how might this affect your future? And 2) How do you feel about the proposed management solution (Phased Adaptive Management) put forward by the NWMO?

Ninety one (91) youth made written responses, many of these with multiple comments, reflecting the range of views and opinions on the subject as may be found among youth in northern Saskatchewan. Many other young people offered their comments verbally in the small group setting. The range of views gathered is summarized as follows:

1. **Nuclear waste is dangerous.** Taken to heart from the presentation by Dr. Hodge, the comments around this theme echoed the serious nature of the waste disposal problem. Over one third of the written responses noted the potential for damage to the environment, wildlife and people from a spill or leak of nuclear waste material.
2. **The land is sacred.** Traditional lands are held to be sacred, not only to Aboriginal Elders, leaders and traditional resource users, but to young people. It is interesting to note the value placed on maintaining the health and safety of the wildlife and the land over the creation of jobs, profits or a more convenient form of energy.

3. **“Outsiders” just want to dump their garbage in the North [our traditional homelands].** Several comments reflect animosity toward the “south”, generally meaning outsiders, industry or non-local people. There is a sense that outsiders don’t care about northerners’ best interests, and would use the north as a dumping ground for nuclear waste, not caring about the potential consequences.
4. **No nuclear waste storage in Northern Saskatchewan, please!** Forty comments indicated specifically that nuclear waste should NOT be stored in Northern Saskatchewan; rather, the waste should be stored at the reactor sites, or somewhere else out East: “Store the waste in your territory and let us know how it goes. Maybe we can visit your sites.”
5. **Extreme views are balanced: No nuclear energy at all vs. Nuclear energy is good.** Eight responses simply said, we do not want nuclear power or anything to do with it. An equal number of responses stated that nuclear power has a positive impact.
6. **Technology will eventually find an answer to the nuclear waste disposal problem.** “You must be able to work out a better way to produce energy [than nuclear]”.
7. **We need/want more information.** Fifteen responses requested more information/education about the full nuclear fuel issue, the pros and the cons of the waste management approaches. It was quite clear that the youth want complete information, not just a briefing.
8. **Deal with nuclear waste now.** Eight responses indicated that the waste issue, as serious as it is, should be settled as soon as possible.
9. **Make it permanent.** Across all responses, the majority recognized the serious danger posed by high level nuclear waste and understood that it must be properly managed. Fourteen responses indicated that the waste should be permanently disposed of, with no option left open for future generations to reprocess it or otherwise retrieve it. “Terrorists might try to come to the North and steal the spent fuel to make bombs”. There seemed no good reason to leave the options open.
10. **We cannot do anything about it, so, no comment.** Thankfully, only two of ninety-one young people felt this sense of helplessness or hopelessness. One response indicated that no matter what we decide, our fate is sealed: the USA is just going to bomb us anyway!

Other responses:

One adult present expressed concern about the NWMO making this presentation at the Youth Wellness Conference, that it was "insulting". This comment comes out of deeply held frustration with the uranium mining industry talking and talking and still not following through on many of its claims and promises. Given this attitude exists in Northern Saskatchewan, it will be difficult for the NWMO to engage in further dialogue without discharging the first issues. Rightly or wrongly, the NWMO is held to be part of the uranium mining industry that has helped to establish this destructive pattern of thought and practice.

Conclusion

Though the written responses were brief, the exercise proved valuable in gleaning the "gut reaction" to the Draft Summary Report and the recommended Phased Adaptive Approach. Two elements of the recommended waste management approach were highlighted for the youth: the extended time frame for public input into the waste disposal decision making process and the emphasis on keeping the options open for future generations to retrieve/reprocess the waste.

The youth were readily able to understand the implications of reprocessing of the high level waste and the fact that even more dangerous by-products would be created, including plutonium. The response to the idea that Canadians want to leave options open to future generations was very interesting – the knee-jerk reaction among this group was "No way!" The young people of northern Saskatchewan say "Store the waste securely and permanently."

Extreme views were held in a balance: equal numbers of young people expressed the view that nuclear waste management is important in their lives, compared with those that "don't care". It was also interesting to note that an equal number of youth gave their praises to nuclear energy as compared to those opposed to nuclear energy.

Follow-Up

Given the draft recommendation is set to extend the public dialogue and decision making process over a thirty year period, it seems necessary to conduct further dialogue with young people. Youth have requested more information for themselves; participants in previous dialogue sessions have requested complete information for presentation in the primary and secondary schools. Often, the public school system is an outlet for disseminating information to households, first by educating the student and second, by supplying materials to take home. On many subjects, the hand-outs coming home from school are the first way for

community members to obtain information. As such, we recommend that the NWMO invest resources to develop a standard presentation package for use in the public school environment.

To better relate to young people, the presentation style should be varied and interactive. Lecture-style presentations should be avoided. Youth also respond better to their own peers, so efforts to train youth facilitators would help to engage young people in the dialogue process. Various possibilities for engaging the youth in the decision making process should be considered, such as panel discussions, debate, drama, role playing, youth parliament, science fairs, research and writing competitions.

Having young people engage in dialogue through writing is more effective than large group discussion, however, discussion in small groups of 4-6 people is the ideal. "Hands-on" activities are very important. The presence of the sample fuel bundle, for instance, made a tremendous difference to the level and quality of engagement. A new media/DVD presentation and interactive displays are more costly for initial development, but would save the expense of NWMO presenters and would standardize the information going out. The resulting responses will have greater value if based on consistent information at each presentation.