NWMO representatives didn't impress writer

Saturday December 04, 2004

Timmins Times — To the Editor:

The only three times in history that nuclear waste was removed from its production site for storage, resulted in radioactive leaks to the environment. Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Hanford, Washington and Maxey Flats, Kentucky. At the recent Timmins meeting, I asked the NWMO, in consideration of this uncertain track record, how could Canadians be assured of the safety regarding proposed waste handling plans. The NWMO nuclear physicist, Sean Russell stated that a reliance on Canadian regulations would ensure our safety.

The next evening, during a discussion on transportation, I asked Sean about the helicopter flight of plutonium MOX fuel, on January 14th , 2000, from Sault Ste Marie to Chalk River. I explained that adherence to regulations does offer safety, but Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. broke the law by transporting this nuclear material by air. So, how can Canadians be certain that the "all nuclear industry" NWMO will now operate legally, follow regulations and keep us safe?

Sean, the nuclear physicist, replied that he was unaware of any such helicopter flight and stated that he has no knowledge of any laws being broken. I replied "Oh gee, you don't know about that?" At that point, seeing Sean on tenuous ground, another NWMO representative, Bill, in an attempt to minimize the illegal flight said, "Bah, it was just a little chunk, the size of my fist." I suppose that was a " big boy with big toys" approach meant to impress us "good-ol' boys from Timmins." Bill wasn't aware that we're no ordinary dummies here in Timmins. We happen to know that, a fist full of plutonium is enough to cause hundreds of thousands of casualties.

I found Bill's attitude to be cavalier and Sean to be surprisingly uninformed for a nuclear physicist. The discussion made it clear to me why the US, in its wisdom, did not entrust Canadians with two fist-sized chunks of plutonium. That would have comprised what is termed a "critical mass", enough to create an atomic explosion.

Regardless, the Canadian atomic industry record of illegal transportation, leaves me with a feeling of mistrust. I mean, if we can't trust the government to transport a fist full of nuclear material legally, how can we feel comfortable with their proposals concerning 70,000 tons of nuclear waste? Perhaps City Councilors like Kevin Vincent, Gary Scripnick, Denis Saudino and Pat Andersen, who have publicly expressed a positive interest in the NWMO approach, could address the question of illegal activity and public safety when they make their pitch at the next NWMO meeting in Timmins on Dec 13, 2004.

Larry Levesque
Timmins, Ontario