



Doug Blackpoint



by Scott Harris

Northern Saskatchewan Residents Take On Nuclear Industry

There are 2.3 million fuel bundles – each one weighing 24 kilograms – sitting in temporary storage facilities in Canada. Packed neatly, they would completely fill six full-sized hockey rinks from the surface of the ice to the top of the boards. And all of it – 46,000 tonnes in all – will be dangerously radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years.

What to do about all this nuclear waste – Canada’s radioactive legacy from more than 40 years of nuclear power generation in Ontario, New Brunswick and Quebec – is a problem of staggering proportions. And as Canada’s six remaining nuclear reactors continue to pump out 85,000 more radioactive bundles of waste each year, it’s a problem that’s only getting worse.

For residents in a handful of communities in Ontario and Saskatchewan, this issue hits close to home. Their communities are being targeted for what the nuclear industry says is the solution to the problem: a permanent, centralized underground dump for all of Canada’s current and future nuclear waste.

At the centre of it all is an organization most Canadians have never heard of: the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO). Made up of members of Canada’s nuclear industry, since 2002 the NWMO has been tasked with finding what it calls “an informed and willing community” to be Canada’s permanent nuclear waste dump. Since the site selection process began in 2010, 21 communities have expressed interest and 15 are currently in the NWMO’s screening process.

People have been active in Saskatchewan for many years, telling government that nuclear waste should not be buried in the province. In this photo, people gathered in Regina for the final leg of the “7000 Generations Walk Against Nuclear Waste” where participants travelled more than 800 kilometres over two months.

But residents of northern Saskatchewan, where three of the communities being targeted for the dump are located – English River First Nation, Pinehouse, and Creighton – say that their communities are anything but willing, and they’re putting up a fight in Saskatchewan to stop the dump through an inspiring network of northern residents called the Committee for Future Generations.

“This isn’t the first time northerners have been exposed to danger from the nuclear conglomerate,” says Marius Paul, a Denesuline from the English River First Nation. “When uranium mining was first being introduced to the north, those that were able to get a sense of what was happening were opposed, but it got pushed through in much the same way this nuclear

waste repository is being pushed, with the industry claiming that it educated and consulted the people. It's the same story with Indigenous peoples all over the world – it's all smoke and mirrors.”

Those fighting the dump in northern Saskatchewan argue that while the NWMO – and even their own elected representatives – talk about consultation and education with community members to help them make a decision about whether or not they want a dump, the reality on the ground is completely different.

“Education involves presenting or supporting research of *all* information and allowing participants to make their own informed decision without fear of rejection or intimidation,” says Doreen Docken, a Métis educator who lives in Pinehouse's neighbouring community of Beauval. “To date, the nuclear industry has provided no information to our communities regarding the risk of storing nuclear waste.”

“Our communities are being told to shut up and listen,” adds Fred Pederson, an Elder living in the community of Pinehouse. “We are not allowed to research and educate ourselves of the truth, or share the truth of the dangerous effects of nuclear waste. The people of Pinehouse are opposed to bringing nuclear waste here – 60 per cent of the community signed a petition opposing nuclear waste – but village administration will not acknowledge the petition. The NWMO has bribed our administration with money and promises of jobs. Signs that we have made and put up saying ‘No to nuclear waste’ keep getting torn down. Our rights and freedoms have been removed from us.”

John Smerek, a local business owner in Pinehouse, agrees that the so-called consultation process is more of an all-out propaganda effort, and

that it's having serious impacts in the community.

“The community of Pinehouse has been divided and split since the NWMO has been allowed to trespass into our community,” Smerek says. “There is no healthy debate with the elected administration in this regard as the administration has taken it upon itself to move forward to support the nuclear waste issue without consulting the people of Pinehouse. Rather, the leaders alone, with the NWMO, have profiled all people who ask about the risk, referring to us as an opposing minority. And the NWMO and [uranium corporations] Cameco and Areva have been pushing money into our community for events and projects. That makes it hard for us as the Committee for Future Generations to compete with the industry's agenda.”

Members of the Committee say that the economic challenges in these isolated, mostly Indigenous communities are being used as leverage by the nuclear industry with the usual promises of jobs and economic stimulus.

“Like other First Nations communities that have been pushed into a corner with little economic development, we are being forced into a ‘take it or suffer poverty’ situation,” says English River First Nation member Candyce Paul. “With the passing of the omnibus bills over the last two years we see that our lands and waters are the target for resource extraction and the dumping ground for everything toxic and radioactive. There is no accountability to keep these corporations from turning our homelands into wastelands and permanently destroying our ability to develop any real sustainable economy while maintaining our cultural integrity on our own land.”

But despite the economic blackmail, false information and intimidation,

members of the Committee for Future Generations say they will never allow a dump to be built in their communities, and they're rallying support from around the province in their fight.

The Committee has collected more than 12,000 signatures on a petition calling on the Saskatchewan government to ban the transportation of storage of nuclear waste within its borders. And they're building a network of activists in their northern communities and partnering with supporters in the south of the province and around the world to oppose not just the dump, but the entire nuclear industry.

“Although our immediate goal is to stop nuclear waste from coming to Saskatchewan, we realize that for every day a nuclear reactor is in operation anywhere in the world, more nuclear waste piles up, deepening the crisis,” says Max Morin, a Committee member from Beauval. “It only makes sense, then, for our committee to take on a secondary goal of working towards phase-out of the nuclear industry. So we are also spreading the message that for the sake of all life on the planet, now and future generations, society must transition to renewable sources of energy, allowing industry to stop the production of this most lethal and long-lasting substance.”

Taking on one of the wealthiest industries on the planet is a lofty goal, to be sure, but Committee members say they're undeterred.

“Never underestimate the power of ordinary people to restore sanity to the world,” says Beauval resident Debbie Mihalicz.

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