

WRITTEN BY VI BUI

RADIOACTIVE WASTE:

THE MAKING OF A GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN



In November 2020, Natural Resources Canada determined it was time to review and update their 20-year-old radioactive waste policy. Although it's an issue that intersects with many of the Council's core values, we have never had an active campaign on radioactive waste or nuclear power. But following the November 2020 announcement, our volunteer chapters and voting members made it clear that this was an opportunity for a national campaign about nuclear waste that the Council of Canadians could not pass up. The campaign that emerged is a powerful example of how a national organization can take direction from its grassroots activists and quickly have a meaningful impact on critical issues.

Chapter activists worked together to mobilize 7,400 people across Canada to submit their input on the draft policy to Natural Resources Canada (NRCan). With staff support, they also produced a compendium of resources related to nuclear waste, an in-depth analysis of the draft federal policy, a webinar unpacking the nuclear industry's greenwashing, and a series of analyses that connect the nuclear waste issue with corporate capture, Indigenous rights, and community consent. It was a powerful demonstration of how a grassroots organization like the Council of Canadians can mobilize quickly, connect people across the country, and stand up for people and the environment.

So, how did we get there?

When NRCan announced its review, Council of Canadians chapter members who had already been working on uranium mining in Saskatchewan, fighting nuclear waste dumps in Ontario, and opposing small-modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) in New Brunswick all realized how critical this moment was in making progress on their local campaigns around radioactive waste. They came together and launched a campaign that mobilized thousands of people to provide input into the draft federal policy, educated Council supporters, and strengthened their local work and the cross-chapter collaboration.



Ann Pohl, Kitchissippi-Ottawa Valley Chapter member.

They were clear on why this collaboration was so crucial.

"It's time for the Council to get active on this," said Kitchissippi-Ottawa Valley chapter member Ann Pohl. "It touches corporate capture, it touches climate, and it touches Indigenous rights in particular."

Ann, alongside six other chapter members from across the country, submitted a resolution at the Council's Annual Meeting of Members to get the national organization's attention on the issue.

Chapter members from across the country came together and formed a working group, collectively guiding the direction of the campaign. It's here that it becomes clear why grassroots work—organizing that happens for communities, by communities—is so crucial. Community-based organizers understand the unique attributes, concerns, and challenges of the communities they live in, and they can organize campaigns in that context. Acknowledging their local community's hesitation around the issue, they identified the need to educate and engage other chapters, Council members, and the public about the complexity around radioactive waste.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Ann's fellow chapter member Ian Pineau, who was relatively new to the topic, was the designated 'non-expert' voice in the working group, a role he played to ensure that campaign materials were accessible to everyone, regardless of their prior knowledge about the topic.

"We have to make it clear so that individuals can understand why it's such an important issue and how it affects all of those other categories the Council speaks to," said Ian. "That's the critical work."

The campaign tapped into a wealth of knowledge and experience among chapter members who have worked directly on many aspects of nuclear waste, as well as a broad network of experts, advocates, and community groups active on the issue.



Gail Wylie, Fredericton chapter member.

Gail Wylie from the Fredericton chapter echoed Ian's thoughts.

"If something comes from a local centre, where people are really living with the issue, there is a passion there," Gail explained. "That's what drives the campaign forward and gives it the energy it needs. Things with abstract titles never go anywhere."

All the analyses, the action alert, the webinar, and resources compiled during the campaign were written by chapter members or built on their grassroots engagement—especially KOV's Ann Pohl and Marilyn Hay (a member of the Kitchener-Waterloo chapter and a Regional Representative on the Council's Board of Directors).

Ian spoke about the importance of having issue experts work alongside newcomers.

"There's information that's out there that Gail pulls in and has access to—and we have tremendous support from experts like Ole Hendrickson and Gordon Edwards," he said. "And then some of the experienced chapter members from the Council were able to see the connections."



Ian Pineau, Kitchissippi-Ottawa Valley Chapter member.

These connections were recognized and felt across the country. From the Saint John and Fredericton chapters' intervention in the proposal to renew Point LePreau nuclear plant's license, to the Ottawa and KOV chapters' participation in the hearings on Chalk River's Near Surface Disposal Facility, chapter members brought to the working group decades of experience engaging with the nuclear industry and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC).

Chapters highlighted the cozy relationship between the nuclear industry and its regulator, the CNSC, provided local examples of the industry's bullying tactics and expansive lobbying power, cut through the industry's talking points around SMRs, and demonstrated the need for an independent, arm's length oversight body.

Additionally, the working group highlighted the multiple violations of Indigenous rights throughout the nuclear production life cycle. They pulled from chapter activists' knowledge of impacts of uranium mining in Saskatchewan, solidarity work with First Nations communities affected by uranium processing in northern Ontario, and ongoing relationship with First Nations opposing the proposed nuclear waste dumps across Ontario.

An incredible amount has been achieved during the relatively short life of this campaign. But to chapter members, the work continues.

"It's a long way from a done deal... In a lot of ways, we are just getting started," said Ian. The larger task of educating the public and opposing the nuclear waste dump proposals is still happening across the country.

As soon as the processes around the federal policy wrapped up, Ann and Ian jumped right back into a consultation around the proposed Near Surface Disposal Facility in Chalk River, pointing out the lack of free, prior, and informed consent from Algonquin nations throughout the process. Gail and her fellow Chapter members in New Brunswick continued to raise their concerns with the province's investment in SMRs.

But now, these folks know that there is a network of chapter activists and allies across the country who are ready to support, affirm, and lift up their local struggles. They now see their local work as part of a larger thread that connects all of our fights to protect water, defend democracy, support Indigenous rights, and hold government accountable.

Many Council of Canadians chapter members have spent decades in this fight. They know the work continues, and that the frontlines are their local communities.

None of this would be possible without your commitment. **CP**

Vi Bui is the Ontario-Quebec Regional Organizer at the Council of Canadians.