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N.B. has no plans to store nuclear waste from other areas

Greg Weston

Although a national organization has indicated New Brunswick may be receptive to housing a nuclear waste storage facility, both the government and environmental groups disagree.

"Can you imagine?" said David Coon, executive director of the Conservation Council of New Brunswick.

"You saw what the opposition was to uranium exploration in New Brunswick. People would not want radioactive waste imported into New Brunswick from Ontario to come to a dump here."

The Nuclear Waste Management Organization was jointly established in 2002 by Ontario Power Generation Inc., Hydro-Quebec and NB Power to manage Canada's nuclear waste. These provinces are the only ones in Canada with nuclear generation facilities.

In 2007, the federal government accepted its recommendation that a national storage site for nuclear waste should be developed. Since then, the organization has been proceeding with plans for an underground repository, which includes finding a location.

Reports last week cited NWMO internal documents that suggested New Brunswick and Saskatchewan had been more receptive to allowing such a site than Ontario and Quebec were.

In a 2009 Government of Saskatchewan survey related to various nuclear activities, 86 per cent of 769 people polled said they were opposed to allowing nuclear waste disposal and storage in their province, while 12 per cent were supportive.

People cited health and the environment as reasons for their opposition, as well as concerns about the possible location of a storage site.

Coon said there would be similar opposition from New Brunswickers.

"People wouldn't want (nuclear waste) travelling along our roads and along our waterways," he said. "There is no more hazardous waste on the planet than radioactive waste from nuclear power plants.

"It's very long-lived, it's full of a toxic and radioactive soup of elements including plutonium, the most toxic substance we know of."

Premier David Alward also rejected the idea of a New Brunswick repository last week.

"This province is not pursuing a nuclear waste site," he said in a statement.

Most of the radioactive waste for such a facility would come from Ontario, which has the largest nuclear production and the biggest need for disposal, and Quebec, where strong public opposition prompted a motion in the legislature in 2008 that prohibits importing nuclear waste from other provinces.

New Brunswick had a similar policy under the former Frank McKenna government, but has since not had an official stance on the issue.

The reactor at Point Lepreau, New Brunswick's only nuclear asset, is offline due to a delay-plagued refurbishment project and isn't producing any nuclear waste.

When operational, waste from Lepreau is stored on-site in large, above-ground concrete vaults.

"It means you don't have to transport it anywhere," Coon said.

"It means it's not out of sight, out of mind. It's right there above the surface, so you can monitor it very easily and deal with any problems that come along."

Nuclear waste storage is regulated under federal legislation and the province wouldn't issue any approval to operate to such a facility.

However, the development and use of such a site would be subject to an environmental impact assessment under provincial regulations.

The New Brunswick environment minister has the final say in such a review.