

Another Voice: Sitewide removal is the only responsible choice at West Valley

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The West Valley Nuclear Waste Facility 30 miles south of Buffalo has housed radioactive and toxic waste for over 50 years on a site that should never have been allowed to hold any waste nor would be allowed today because of its erodible soils. Now the Department of Energy (DOE) and NYS Energy Research & Development Authority (NYSERDA) will determine the final disposition of that waste through an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. WNY has a huge stake in the outcome as it will determine whether or not our waters will be protected from nuclear waste contamination, now and for thousands of years.

The four alternatives are: “sitewide close-in-place,” “sitewide removal,” some “hybrid,” or “no action.” Citizens and elected officials in WNY argue for ‘sitewide removal’ to protect our waters and public health. An EIS decision is based on scientific analyses, assessment of risk, and cost/benefit. Since 1980, DOE/NYSERDA have done many studies, and more will have to be done especially in light of changing weather conditions and climate destabilization. But we have questions. How can one predict hundreds or thousands of years into the future? In light of climate change, how can we even predict what will happen to that site in 30 years? What if it is less costly to leave the nuclear material on site and the risk is predicted to be very low, is that OK? What if the prediction is wrong? Every exposure to radioactivity increases the risk of serious adverse health impacts: cancer, birth defects, neurological effects and other health damage.

And who bears the risk? We do, and we believe that the value of our lives and our home on the Great Lakes cannot be measured against cost. We want “full cleanup,” even as we acknowledge that no one knows what to do with nuclear waste, and there is no place where it can be safely stored for millennia. Yet we do not consent to being exposed to nuclear waste now; we do not have the right to impose exposure on future generations; we will not expose people elsewhere.

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So what to do? Alan Watts offers us a way: "Problems that remain persistently insoluble should always be suspected as questions asked in the wrong way." Instead of asking which alternative, we should be asking 'how will we safely dig up and categorize, design containers to shield surrounding life, store above ground, monitor, and eventually move it to a safer place?' For West Valley on unstable, erodible land connected to the Great Lakes, "Sitewide Removal" is really the only responsible action.

Nuclear waste is an insoluble problem at this time, so what are the right questions? What values should guide us? The problem, asked another way, might be: *How do we best protect life from nuclear waste until we find a solution?* This requires the sequestration and isolation of material over eons. And it demands that we find creative ways to pass on knowledge, information and locations of nuclear waste from generation to generation, adjusting to culture and the times. We can certainly stop making more waste, ending nuclear energy and weapons programs. And maybe we could learn from the harm we have done to life on earth by splitting the atom without a way to undo the damage. If interested in more information: <niagarasierraclub.com> and to make a comment until May 25, send to SEISWestValleySite@emcbc.doe.gov.

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