nwmo

NUCLEAR WASTE MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATION
SOCIÉTÉ DE GESTION DES DÉCHETS NUCLÉAIRES

# Choosing a Way Forward

## The Future Management of Canada's Used Nuclear Fuel

## A Summary

# Summary

Three years ago, the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) launched a mission of developing collaboratively with Canadians a management approach for the long-term care of Canada's used nuclear fuel. We envisaged an approach that would be socially acceptable, technically sound, environmentally responsible and economically feasible. We are convinced that it is time to act decisively.

Canadians believe that our generation must assume responsibility now for the long-term management of the nuclear waste that is produced to supply our energy needs. This is an ethical obligation. Canadians want to be assured that they and their environment will be safe. And, they want a flexible approach that can accommodate new knowledge. The NWMO's assessment of the options, based on the best science and technology at home and around the world, gives us confidence that we have the necessary knowledge to meet these expectations.

The NWMO is recommending that Canada proceed in a deliberate and collaborative way to isolate the used fuel in a deep underground repository. The waste would be safely and securely contained by engineered barriers and the surrounding geology. It would be monitored and remain retrievable over time. Our recommendation recognizes that how the technical method is implemented is crucial. We intend to seek an informed willing host community. The process will be phased and transparent with explicit decision points where citizens are provided with genuine opportunities to influence progress and outcomes. We call our recommendation Adaptive Phased Management.

## The Challenge of Nuclear Waste

For decades Canadians have been using electricity generated by nuclear power reactors in Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick. We have produced almost 2 million used fuel bundles – about 36,000 metric tonnes of uranium – a number which will double if our 22 existing reactors operate for an average of 40 years each. When used nuclear fuel is removed from a reactor, it is considered a waste product, is radioactive and requires careful management. Although the radioactivity decreases with time, chemical toxicity persists and the used fuel will remain a potential health risk for a very long time.

Ensuring safety and security for material that will remain hazardous for longer than recorded history is a significant challenge – technically and socially. Any decision taken today will be implemented over many decades. Undoubtedly the program will encounter major changes in science and technology, institutions, values and political perspectives, and economic and financial conditions.

Canada's used fuel is now safety stored on a temporary basis at licensed facilities located where the waste is produced. Like many other countries with nuclear power programs, Canada has yet to decide what to do with this used fuel over the long term. That is why the Government of Canada passed a law requiring the owners of used nuclear fuel to create the NWMO. Consistent with the *Nuclear Fuel Waste Act (NFWA)* we engaged interested citizens including specialists, stakeholders and Aboriginal peoples in research and dialogue to assess the options for long-term management.

## Listening to Canadians

Our study was built on a firm foundation – a mission statement integrating the elements of sustainable development; a pre-eminent focus on safety and security; a perspective that takes a long view; a framework of ethics and values; and recognition of the requirement for citizen engagement.

Canadians expect that the best scientific and technical knowledge will be used to understand the risks and identify the technical methods appropriate for used fuel management. However, scientific and technical evidence and analysis, while essential, cannot be the sole basis of our choice. While science can speak to the probability of an occurrence of an event, science cannot speak to social tolerance for its occurrence. The views of Canadian society in judging benefits or risks, and assessing the social implications of various approaches are critical to the development of a socially acceptable recommendation.

Our study was a dynamic and interactive dialogue with thousands of fellow citizens and specialists. Each phase of our analysis was shaped by those conversations and reported in public documents. Through a wide variety of techniques we sought to understand the values of Canadians, have a dialogue with Aboriginal peoples, explore future scenarios, and continually test what we were hearing.

There was common ground. Two important requirements became evident: **the approach must be safe and secure** – for people, communities and the environment; and **it must be fair** – both to current and future generations.

We came to understand that these requirements of safety and fairness have important implications. They mean:

- Our generation needs to take active responsibility to achieve a safe, long-term response to our waste problem – it is imprudent and unfair to wait any longer;
- The plan needs to have a definitive outcome, but also needs to provide flexibility along the way for future generations to make their own decisions;
- We, and future generations, need to be able to monitor the waste to ensure continued safety and be able to access it if safety is compromised or science provides better advice.

Citizens also made their views known about energy policy. The NWMO did not examine or make a judgement about the appropriate role of nuclear power generation in Canada. We suggest that those future decisions should be the subject of their own assessment and public process. Used fuel exists today and will continue to be produced to the end of the lives of Canada's existing nuclear facilities. The focus of our study was to recommend a responsible path forward for addressing its long-term management. Our study process and evaluation of options were intended neither to promote nor penalize Canada's decisions regarding the future of nuclear power.

## Assessing the Options

As required by the *NFWA* we compared the benefits, risks and costs of three technical methods: deep geological disposal in the Canadian Shield; centralized storage above or below ground; and storage at nuclear reactor sites. We benefited from the vast base of research conducted in Canada and around the world over more than 50 years.

The framework for our comparison of options emerged from the objectives that Canadians believe to be important: fairness, public health and safety, worker health and safety, community well-being, security, environmental integrity, economic viability and adaptability. It was also informed by the knowledge and expertise of specialists. Our ethical framework resulted in social and technical aspects of safety and risk being treated in a holistic and integrated way throughout the assessment.

Our analysis concluded that while each of the approaches had distinct advantages, no one perfectly addressed all of the objectives which citizens said were important.

The storage options were expected to perform well over the near term; however, existing reactor sites were not chosen for their technical suitability as permanent storage sites. Furthermore, the communities hosting the nuclear reactors have an expectation that used nuclear fuel will eventually be moved. The NWMO believes that the risks and uncertainties concerning the performance of these approaches over the long term are substantial in the areas of public health and safety, environmental integrity, security, economic viability and fairness. A key contributing factor is the extent to which storage approaches rely on strong institutions and active management to ensure safe and effective performance. The NWMO expects that these capacities will be strong over the foreseeable future but uncertain over the very long term.

The deep geological disposal option was judged to perform well against the objectives in the very long term because of the combination of engineered and natural barriers to isolate the fuel. The key weakness, however, is its lack of adaptability, which is an important objective in the minds of citizens. Over the short term, the approach was judged to be less flexible in responding to changing knowledge or circumstances. There is some uncertainty about how the system will perform over the very long term because we cannot obtain advance proof of actual

performance over thousands of years. This approach also provides comparatively little opportunity for future generations to influence the way in which the used fuel is managed. Its lack of adaptability is a weakness that may affect the performance of the system over time on other objectives such as public health and safety and environmental integrity.

This examination led us to develop another approach that incorporates the most significant advantages of the options assessed and is supported by a phased decision-making process designed to actively and collaboratively manage risk and uncertainty.

## Adaptive Phased Management

The NWMO recommends an alternative approach – Adaptive Phased Management. It consists of both a technical method and a management system. Its key attributes are:

- Ultimate centralized containment and isolation of used nuclear fuel in an appropriate Geological formation;
- Phased and adaptive decision-making;
- Optional shallow storage at the central site as a contingency;
- Continuous monitoring;
- Provision for retrievability; and
- Citizen engagement.

The table that follows describes the concept in greater detail.

**Representative Conceptual Design Activities for Adaptive Phased Management**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Concept** | A staged management approach with three phases of implementation:<br>• Phase 1: Preparing for Central Used Fuel Management<br>• Phase 2: Central Storage and Technology Demonstration<br>• Phase 3: Long-term Containment, Isolation and Monitoring<br><br>**Phase 1 (approximately the first 30 years):**<br>Preparing for central used fuel management would comprise the following activities:<br>• Maintain storage and monitoring of used fuel at nuclear reactor sites.<br>• Develop with citizens an engagement program for activities such as design of the process for choosing a site, development of technology and key decisions during implementation.<br>• Continued engagement with regulatory authorities to ensure pre-licensing work would be suitable for the subsequent licensing processes.<br>• Select a central site that has rock formations suitable for shallow underground storage, an underground characterization facility and a deep geological repository.<br>• Continue research into technology improvements for used fuel management.<br>• Initiate the licensing process, which triggers the environmental assessment process under the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act*.<br>• Undertake site characterization, safety analyses and an environmental assessment for the shallow underground storage facility, underground characterization facility and deep geological repository at the central site, and to transport used fuel from the reactor sites.<br>• Obtain a licence to prepare the site.<br>• Develop and certify transportation containers and used fuel handling capabilities.<br>• Obtain a licence to construct the underground characterization facility at the central site.<br>• Decide whether or not to proceed with construction of a shallow underground storage facility and to transport used fuel to the central site for storage.<br>• If a decision is made to construct the shallow underground storage facility, obtain a construction licence and then an operating licence for the storage facility. |

| Representative Conceptual Design Activities for Adaptive Phased Management | |
|---|---|
| **Concept (cont'd)** | **Phase 2 (approximately the next 30 years):**<br>Central storage and technology demonstration would comprise the following activities:<br>• If a decision is made to construct shallow underground storage, begin transport of used fuel from the reactor sites to the central site for extended storage.<br>• If a decision is made not to construct shallow underground storage, continue storage of used fuel at reactor sites until the deep repository is available at the central site.<br>• Conduct research and testing at the underground characterization facility to demonstrate and confirm the suitability of the site and the deep repository technology.<br>• Engage citizens in the process of assessing the site, the technology and the timing for placement of used fuel in the deep repository.<br>• Decide when to construct the deep repository at the central site for long-term containment and isolation.<br>• Complete the final design and safety analyses to obtain the required operating licence for the deep repository and associated surface handling facilities.<br><br>There may be a need for transportation containers and facilities to produce them; processing facilities to load the fuel into transportation containers; production facilities for storage containers; and processing facilities to transfer the fuel from transportation to storage containers.<br><br>**Phase 3 (beyond approximately 60 years):**<br>Long-term containment, isolation and monitoring would comprise the following activities:<br>• If used fuel is stored at a central shallow underground facility, retrieve and repackage used fuel into long-lived containers.<br>• If used fuel is stored at reactor sites, transport used fuel to the central facility for repackaging.<br>• Place the used fuel containers into the deep geological repository for final containment and isolation.<br>• Decommission the shallow underground storage facility.<br>• Continue monitoring and maintain access to the deep repository for an extended period of time to assess the performance of the repository system and to allow retrieval of used fuel, if required.<br>• Engage citizens in on-going monitoring of the facility.<br>• A future generation would decide when to decommission the underground characterization facility and any remaining long-term experiments or demonstrations of technology, and when to close the repository, decommission the surface handling facilities and the nature of any postclosure monitoring of the system.<br><br>There may be a need for production facilities for used fuel containers; processing facilities to transfer the fuel from storage to the deep repository; and production facilities for sealing materials.<br><br>The current owners of used fuel would continue to be responsible for its interim management at the reactor sites. The NWMO would assume management responsibility of the used fuel when it is transported from the reactor sites to the central facility for long-term management. |

## Implementation

The NWMO will be responsible for implementing the approach chosen. The insights gained and relationships established during our study phase will provide a firm foundation for implementation. Our vision and values will continue to guide us as we strive to gain the confidence of Canadians. Canada has an extensive system of oversight. At a minimum the NWMO will meet all applicable regulatory and licensing requirements; our goal is to exceed them. We must ensure that our security provisions and safeguards are compliant with Canada's nuclear non-proliferation policy and international agreements.

## Citizen engagement

Detailed implementation plans will be designed through dialogue with the many communities of interest who will have important roles to play. We expect to hear a diversity of voices as we seek advice and receive direction on the design of the process and the issues to be explored. In a democratic society, the inclusiveness and the integrity of the process by which decisions are taken are key.

The NWMO will be required to apply for licences to prepare a site, construct, operate, modify, and decommission a nuclear fuel waste facility. We will be required to demonstrate compliance throughout. At each step, there will be opportunity for further public scrutiny.

## Financing

Financial surety means determining what costs can reasonably be expected to be incurred over the lifetime of the project, along with some contingency for unexpected events, and putting in place the financial mechanisms to ensure the necessary money will be available when it is required. The NWMO has an ongoing obligation to assess the accuracy of the cost estimates for the selected management approach and the sufficiency of contributions to cover cash flow obligations for the life of the project.

The *NFWA* sets out requirements for the establishment of trust funds to finance the long-term management of Canada's nuclear fuel waste. A total of $770 million has been deposited by the waste owners to date. The legislation incorporates explicit provisions that these trust funds will be maintained securely, reported on and used only for the intended purpose.

## Choosing a Location

Although the NWMO is not proceeding with site selection as part of this study, there has been intense interest in the considerations and principles that might influence the process. The NWMO intends to seek an informed, willing community to host the central facilities.

In the interest of fairness, we intend to focus within the provinces that are directly involved in the nuclear fuel cycle – Ontario, New Brunswick, Quebec and Saskatchewan. Communities in other regions and provinces may express an interest and should be considered. The NWMO will respect Aboriginal rights, treaties and land claims.

We propose that the siting process be open, inclusive and fair to all parties, giving everyone with an interest in the matter an opportunity to have their views heard and taken into account. The process will ensure that groups most likely to be affected by the facility, including through transportation, are provided with the forms of assistance they require to present their case effectively.

Placing all of Canada's used nuclear fuel in a single central location will require moving it from current decentralized locations. We will need to demonstrate the safety of any transportation system to the satisfaction of citizens. On the basis of the work which the NWMO has conducted, including commissioning background papers, discussions with nuclear waste management organizations in other countries, and our understanding of regulatory requirements, we are confident that used fuel can be transported safely. The design and development of transportation plans, the mode of transport, routes, security and safety measures and emergency preparedness will require the collaborative efforts of many communities of interest.

## Addressing Social, Economic and Cultural Effects

Implementation presents a significant opportunity to recognize and support a host community's vision for its social, cultural and economic aspirations. There will also be a broader set of interests beyond the immediate host community. Reactor site communities will figure prominently. All potentially affected parties must be afforded fair and equitable treatment in assessing and managing potential significant socio-economic effects.

It will be important to design implementation in such a way as to avoid or minimize disruptive impacts on the many affected communities. Where adverse impacts cannot be avoided, implementation must recognize the

contributions and costs borne by the community through appropriately designed mitigation measures. Risks can be mitigated not only by a variety of physical design features, but through institutional, informational and social measures. That will require developing the capacity for community oversight and empowering the communities to have influence in the process.

## Research and Intellectual Capacity

As the NWMO implements the Adaptive Phased Management Approach, we will be committed to integrating continuous learning and adapting the plan to new ideas and technology. To do this, there needs to be a vibrant and robust research and development effort during the development and execution of the program.

## The Recommendation

Adaptive Phased Management tries to find an optimal balance of competing objectives. It embraces the precautionary principle and adaptive management. Societal goals and objectives and successful technology demonstration will determine the pace of implementation. We believe Adaptive Phased Management is the strongest possible foundation for managing the risks and uncertainties that are inherent in the very long time frames over which used nuclear fuel must be managed with care.

- It commits this generation of Canadians to take the first steps now to manage the used nuclear fuel we have created.
- It recognizes that over the long term, it would be imprudent to rely on a human management system alone with its changing forms of institutions and governance.
- It will meet rigorous safety and security standards through its design and process.
- It allows sequential and collaborative decision-making, providing the flexibility to adapt to experience and societal change.
- It provides genuine choice by taking a financially conservative approach, and providing for capacity to be transferred from one generation to the next.
- It promotes continuous learning, allowing for improvements in operations and design that would enhance performance and reduce uncertainties.
- It builds confidence in the technology and supporting systems before the final phase is implemented.
- It provides a viable, safe and secure long-term storage capability, with the potential for retrievability of used fuel which can be exercised until future generations have confidence to close the facility.
- It provides for continuous monitoring and contingency against unforeseen events, either natural or man-made.
- It is rooted in values and ethics, and engages citizens allowing for societal judgements as to whether there is sufficient certainty to proceed with each step.

On the following page is the NWMO's recommendation to the Government of Canada. With a decision about the basic approach the NWMO will then be able to move forward to meet the objective of safely managing Canada's used nuclear fuel for the long term.

The path we propose, built on sound science and technology, is responsible and responsive. Nuclear waste is not a legacy issue we wish to leave to future generations. A decision to act must not be postponed.

*November, 2005*

## NWMO's Recommendation

Our recommendation for the long-term management of used nuclear fuel in Canada has as its primary objectives safety – the protection of humans and the environment – and fairness to this and future generations.

Therefore we recommend to the Government of Canada Adaptive Phased Management, a risk management approach with the following characteristics:

- Centralized containment and isolation of the used fuel in a deep geological repository in a suitable rock formation, such as the crystalline rock of the Canadian Shield or Ordovician sedimentary rock;
- Flexibility in the pace and manner of implementation through a phased decision-making process, supported by a program of continuous learning, research and development;
- Provision for an optional step in the implementation process in the form of shallow underground storage of used fuel at the central site, prior to final placement in a deep repository;
- Continuous monitoring of the used fuel to support data collection and confirmation of the safety and performance of the repository; and
- Potential for retrievability of the used fuel for an extended period, until such time as a future society makes a determination on the final closure, and the appropriate form and duration of postclosure monitoring.

The Nuclear Waste Management Organization would implement this comprehensive approach, in compliance with the *Nuclear Fuel Waste Act (NFWA)* of 2002, and would:

- Meet or exceed all applicable regulatory standards and requirements for protecting the health, safety and security of humans and the environment;
- Provide financial surety through funding by the nuclear energy corporations (currently Ontario Power Generation Inc., Hydro-Québec and NB Power Nuclear) and Atomic Energy of Canada Limited, according to a financial formula as required by the *NFWA*;
- Seek an informed, willing community to host the central facilities. The site must meet the scientific and technical criteria chosen to ensure that multiple engineered and natural barriers will protect human beings, other life forms and the biosphere. Implementation of the approach will respect the social, cultural and economic aspirations of the affected communities;
- Focus site selection for the facilities on those provinces that are directly involved in the nuclear fuel cycle;
- Sustain the engagement of people and communities throughout the phased process of decision and implementation; and
- Be responsive to advances in technology, natural and social science research, Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge, and societal values and expectations.

The NWMO invites all interested individuals and organizations to review our public engagement activities, discussion documents, reports and research on our website at **www.nwmo.ca**.

or contact us at:
**Nuclear Waste Management Organization**
**49 Jackes Avenue**
**Toronto, Ontario**
**Canada M4T 1E2**

**Telephone: 416.934.9814**
**Toll free: 1.866.249.6966**

Design **Hambly & Woolley Inc.** www.hamblywoolley.com