

# NIMBY and nuke waste

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**T**HE POLLUTION from the world's industrial processes has become this century's most serious environmental conflict.

Low- and high-level radioactive wastes, in particular, are being produced with nowhere to put them. The public near every potential site cries out, "Not in my back yard!"

But this is not just a matter of passing the muck to those with less political pull. Deadly-waste disposal is a global problem, and what we should all be saying is NIOBY, "not in *our* back yard."

Ten years ago, Congress passed a law calling for each state to find ways to deal with its own low-level radioactive waste (clothing and tools, for example), either by developing depositories of its own or by joining interstate compacts. But the people in communities all across America objected. Local NIMBY groups invoked the National Environmental Protection Act, which requires public review of the potential impacts of any major development.

Of the six sites around the country that received low-level wastes, three are now closed for various reasons.

It is hard to believe that safe low-level waste disposal is possible. For the last 20 years the nuclear industry has been assuring the public that the problem of disposing of high-level nuclear waste and spent reactor fuel was "solved." But every few years, leaks to the press show that thousands of tons of deadly radioactive waste have accumulated.

A major failure of existing high-level storage (spent fuel rods and other highly radioactive material) has been recently revealed at the government facility at Hanford, Wash. The federal Government Accounting Office reported this fall that the Department of Energy had been downplaying the potential for catastrophe.

Built in 1943 — to house nuclear waste for 10,000 years—the Hanford site has been accused of leaking nuclear waste into the Columbia River drainage system, endangering the drinking water and citizens of Washington and Oregon.

Hanford is a major defense facility, run by the Department of Energy, that recovers plutonium from spent reactor fuel. The radioactive liquid waste now stored in underground storage tanks is producing unexpected and worrisome hydrogen burps. If a spark should touch off one of those hydrogen bubbles, the explosion would rain deadly waste downwind.

**W**HAT HAS taken hold in the United States over the past decade is now happening around the world. Our "backyard" is expanding as more countries are opening up. As the Iron Curtain began to dissolve a couple of years ago, one of the first massive public demonstrations was about pollution.

Changes are happening in Armenia, in Poland, and in Lithuania, where 15,000 people held hands around a nuclear power plant demanding there be no more plants built in their communities. These plants had been ordered by the central government, and the people were not consulted.

The problem with nuclear waste is that no one, including the scientists, have figured out what to do with the 500,000 metric tons already produced in the world.

To end the conflict over nuclear and other waste pollution, there is an obvious first step. We need to recycle, or at least dispose of, all waste at the site of manufacture or generation. If that can't be done, then the experiment or the plant has to be shut down.

This mandate by example will help developing societies in Asia, Africa and South America to rethink the use of a technology that produces wastes they can't get rid of, and which will cause endless costly political conflict.

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