

State evades radioactive waste

By RALPH R. ECHTINAW
STAFF WRITER

Pictures about 36,000 cubic feet of low-grade radioactive waste, spread out among 53 sites in Michigan, growing bigger day by day, all dressed up in no place to go.

That's about the way things stand as state officials choose to ignore the dilemma of where to permanently store this stuff because the answer keeps coming back to build a dump for it in the state.

"It's reaching a stage where something is going to need to be done," said Bob Wilson, an environmental policy adviser for the state Senate Republican caucus. "If it continues to pile up we may be facing a health hazard."

Although the low-grade waste is not nearly as dangerous as spent reactor fuel rods, prolonged exposure to it by humans can have serious effects.

The waste is mostly comprised of contaminated clothing, radioactive substances used to track the flow of drugs in the body and radioactive cancer treatments. It's kept primarily in nuclear power plants, but also in hospitals and

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universities; 53 sites in all. There's more than 360,000 cubic feet of it so far, and 1,300 more cubic feet are added each month.

One of 5

Along with Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Puerto Rico and Washington D.C., Michigan is not allowed to ship low-grade radioactive waste out of state because it hasn't complied with federal law.

Specifically, the state refused to harbor a dumping site after being told to do so by the group of states it joined to form a waste collective.

At the time, state officials said Michigan's environment was too sensitive to accept the dump site.

"Of all the states, Michigan is probably the most high risk state to site it at," said state Sen. Dave Honigman, R-West Bloomfield, who continues to oppose putting a dump site in Michigan.

The collective, made up of Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Indiana and Ohio, said Michigan should provide

the dump because it generates the most low-grade radioactive waste.

Michigan officials refused to do this, so the collective ejected the state.

That was OK for a while because a dump in South Carolina continued to accept Michigan waste. But two years ago the South Carolina people cut Michigan off because state officials weren't doing anything to find or create an alternative dumping ground, said Bill Lukens, the executive director of the Michigan Coalition of Radioactive Materials Users.

Politicos evade it

So the waste has been building up since then, but state politicians, Lukens said, are afraid to deal with the subject now.

"They'll give you a hearing, but they're also concerned about the politics of it," he said. "Everybody just wants to run and hide."

State Sen. Vernon Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids, tried and failed to get action earlier this year. The problem is that no one wants to be the senator or representative with the radioactive waste dump

in his or her district.

"There's a lot of fear in dealing with radioactive waste," Ehlers said. "There's a lot of paranoia about dealing with the issue."

Lukens said the producers of low-grade radioactive waste he represents would be happy if they could ship their waste anywhere. It doesn't have to be Michigan as long as they can get rid of it.

But as long as the stuff just gets stacked away at 53 different locations there's a growing potential for leaks and contamination.

"It's like the national debt," Lukens said. "Sooner or later you've got to pay the piper."

...Waste stored at 5 county sites

The following Oakland County organizations are on the state department of public health's list of 53 Michigan facilities considered generators of low-level radioactive waste.

The waste is currently stored on each site because Michigan has not designated a central disposal site for low-level radioactive waste and is prohibited from shipping it out of state.

William Beaumont Hospital, department of nuclear medicine, on 13 Mile Road in Royal Oak.

Bradley-Thompson Tool

Company, on Eight Mile Road in Southfield. (Expects to eliminate the need for waste storage before Jan. 1, 1993.)

Lesso Diagnostics, on 10 Mile Road in Southfield.

Oxford Biomedical Research, on Star Batt Drive in Rochester Hills.

Smith Kline Beecham Clinical Laboratory, on Indoplex Circle in Farmington Hills.

Other waste generators include 11 colleges and universities, nine hospitals and three nuclear power plants.

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