

# Is Michigan Slated For Nuclear Landfill?

Residents have no choice

Bob Nirkind

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This article is the second of a two-part series on the effects that the indiscriminate care and usage of radioactive waste materials and dangerous chemicals are having, and will continue to have in the future, on man and his environment.

Part One of the series, *Capitalism's Industrial Plagues*, #276, September 1976, dealt with the devastating results of nuclear and chemical dumps, leakages and accidents in the United States and around the world. Part Two now looks into the Federal Government's intention of testing land here in Michigan for the possible construction of a nuclear waste disposal system.

*Note:* A third part was later added to the series: see *Nuclear Plants: Potential Disasters*, #278, November, 1976.

According to the U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) some months ago, it makes no difference whether Michigan's 7.5 million residents react favorably or unfavorably to the prospect of having a nuclear dump in their backyard or beneath their feet.

"The safe disposal of...high-level radioactive wastes from nuclear power plants is a requirement of federal law," insisted an ERDA policy statement, "and consequently is a federal function which is not subject to state control or veto."

Due to its thick salt deposits within the Saline Salt Basin—an underground salt bed of massive proportions beneath Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, New York and Pennsylvania—Michigan has been designated by ERDA as "a prime candidate for selection as a nuclear dumping ground" in the northeastern U.S. This conclusion was reached after the study of two scientific reports put together by geologist Kenneth K. Landes, a professor emeritus of geology at the University of Michigan and an acknowledged expert in the salt deposits of the U.S.

In an interview with the *Detroit Free Press* several months ago, Landes states that Michigan was "absolutely" the choice location in the Saline Salt Basin for a nuclear waste disposal system meeting all the guidelines set up by ERDA for a site selection.

ERDA's guidelines demand that the salt beds be less than 3,000 feet deep and not more than 15 feet thick. The area must be geologically stable and the salt beds must be separated from any possible oil or gas deposits and from old wells which might allow water to reach the salt.

Michigan residents first learned of the government's interest in building a nuclear dump here in late May when federal scientists under the direction of ERDA's research facility, the Oak Ridge National Laboratories in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, announced their intention of drilling an exploratory bore hole ten miles west of Alpena to test the salt formations beneath Alpena, Presque Isle and Montmorency counties in northeastern Michigan.

## Michigan Citizens Protest Choice

The announcement was followed by a wave of angry protests across the state. Governor Milliken, undoubtedly feeling the wrath of his indignant constituents, reacted with the demand that he be given “virtual veto power” over the construction of a dump in Michigan before scientists would be permitted to conduct any tests.

ERDA then countered with a statement that the federal government is allowed to appropriate any land, public or private, for federal projects so long as the owners are compensated. This came not long after an ERDA administrator assured a conference gathering in Chicago that nuclear waste materials would not be dumped in Michigan “if the people don’t want them here.”

In September, however, the government reversed its hard line position and mollified the anger of Michigan’s citizens with the promise that Milliken would be given the veto power he’d called for so spectacularly. Although the reversal appears to have smoothed the state’s ruffled feathers, we’d like to remind any and all concerned that taking the government at its word is as naive and foolhardy an action as putting one’s head in a lion’s mouth.

Assuming that we’re still in the running, Michigan actually encompasses several of the 50 potential locations in a nationwide search for dump sites. Out of those 50, the list will be narrowed down to five or six definite sites. Of those five or six, one or more will be chosen to begin receiving the nuclear waste materials by the mid-1980s.

Thus far, seven of the most likely dump sites—all in the Lower Peninsula—have been pinpointed by Landes for ERDA. They are: Adams Point, on the Lake Huron Shore of Rogers City; Whitefish Bay, just northeast of Alpena; Pulawski Township in Presque Isle County; Rogers City West, four miles from Rogers City; the originally proposed drilling site west of Alpena, Rockport; and an area near the Presque Isle Corporation’s limestone operation on the Lake Huron coast.

While ERDA’s study is as yet not complete, with more of the Saline Salt Basin still to be extensively researched, it does appear as though the federal scientists involved in the testing are leaning heavily towards Michigan.

Although the concern over the disposal—or permanent storage, to be precise—of radioactive waste materials from nuclear power plants has been a relatively recent development in Michigan, it’s been the subject of grave speculation by environmentalists for some time.

## Most Dangerous Substances

Wastes such as plutonium, cesium, tritium and strontium are amongst the most toxic and dangerous radioactive substances known to science and thus the object of much discussion when it comes to disposing of them safely. All of these wastes remain highly radioactive for tens of thousands of years and could quite easily turn any inhabited area into an unlivable Death Valley for as much as 300 human lifetimes.

Because they are stable and thought to be able to contain waste safely for an indefinite period of time, salt beds have become the most recently accepted means of disposing of these materials. Scientists explain that salt beds act as a dense shield against radiation and they resist the high temperatures of the waste.

Underground waste disposal systems are now thought to be the federal government’s answer to its problem of cleaning up after itself, but many scientists simply do not see it that way. As has thus far been observed elsewhere, these scientists maintain that there’s absolutely no conclusive proof that underground disposal offers any more insurance of safe containment than have other methods, some of which have failed miserably.

In Part One of this series, specific instances were cited in which nuclear dumps were not only found to be unsafe, but unacknowledged as well even though a clear and present danger to human and animal life existed.

It was actually admitted in Maxey Flats, Kentucky, the scene of a recent waste seepage, that scientists have no idea how far radioactive waste materials can migrate through the earth. What with all the research and subsequent revelations that these substances are capable of causing cancer, leukemia and other genetic damage, the prospect of having one of these disposal systems underneath us or anywhere around us is far from reassuring.

The rise of capitalism—a vicious, death-bearing plague in-and-of-itself—has delivered us to our current tenuous state. Such massive quantities of alien chemical substances and nuclear waste materials have been introduced into our environment, and consequently into our systems, that there’s plainly no means of escaping their effects.

It's inherent in the nature of capitalism, whether it's in the form of monopoly capitalism as in the U.S. or state capitalism as in Russia or China, that money is used primarily for the purpose of attaining an increased profit margin through corporate expansion and product innovation and expansion.

Capitalist enterprises within these systems have absolutely no interest in policing themselves nor in spending what they feel to be "unrealistic" sums for anti-pollution devices and studies, preferring instead to continue fouling the environment in whatever way they deem necessary.

With productivity as the standard against which all other considerations are measured, preservation of the species included, many industries find it infinitely easier to invest in campaigns to fight against pollution controls than to shell out funds for research into methods of reducing the already-existing and continually-growing pollution level.

As for the rest of us, we're expected to remain passive observers as slowly but surely our lives, as well as theirs, are snuffed out.

# fifth Estate

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