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Du. ; Session:
Alaska State Capitol
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1182
(907) 465-4833
Fax (907) 465-4586
1-800-782-4833

Representative_Reggie_Joule@legis.state.ak.us



During Interim:
P.O. Box 673
Kotzebue, Alaska 99752
(907) 442-3880
Fax (907) 442-3022

Alaska State Legislature
REPRESENTATIVE REGGIE JOULE

SPONSOR STATEMENT

"A Resolution Opposing Arctic marine shipment of nuclear waste between Russia and Japan."

Japanese companies are currently engaged in talks with Russia and France regarding the transport of vitrified high-level radioactive waste (VHLW) across the Arctic Ocean. Russian ice breaker ships would be utilized to clear the way for the vessels transporting the VHLW. While there are currently international standards for the transport of such waste, the U.S. Department of State admits current standards may not take in to account the exceptional factors present in the Arctic Ocean.

While talks regarding the Northeast route are reportedly in the early stages, we must take a strong stand against any such route immediately, to ensure the companies and governments involved are aware of our feelings as they move forward in negotiations. It is extremely important we do everything within our power to protect our waterways, and Alaska's heritage. The transportation of nuclear waste across such a vital fishery to Alaska is a threat not only to the subsistence lifestyle of those living in the area, but also to the overall health of Alaska's people and economy.

The fragile Bering Sea ecosystem is home to the most productive fishery in Alaska and one of the most productive in the North Pacific and the world. A spill of radioactive waste could have devastating effects on the subsistence lifestyle and the health of Alaskans living adjacent to the waterways.

In the unfortunate event of a spill, the potential exists for the ecosystem of the Arctic Ocean to be effected. The ecosystems of our waterways are not contained by man-made borders, and what happens in one part of the ecosystem may effect the whole. Although Alaskans have not been invited to participate in these discussions, it is important that the Legislature make clear its stand in opposition to the transportation of any radioactive nuclear waste across waterways upon which Alaskans so heavily rely.

While discussions of the Northeast route are in the early stages, it is important we take a stand on this important issue now.

Excerpts from....

The Nuclear Control Institute
Washington , DC

Preliminary Report for Comment

**The Sea Transport of Vitrified High-Level
Radioactive Wastes: Unresolved Safety Issues**

Edwin S. Lyman, PhD
Scientific Director
Nuclear Control Institute
December 1996

The Consequences of a Loss of VHLW Cargo at Sea

“One type of accident that was not considered in detail...was one in which the ship and its VHLW cargo is lost at sea. A closer examination of this accident scenario indicates that it can potentially result in severe health consequences for humans and for marine biota.”

However it is important to note that in the worst case, the loss of a damaged VHLW cargo in coastal waters can cause levels of chronic exposure to the public far in excess of those permitted by international standards. This fact was pointed out in an 1987 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/Nuclear Energy Agency...study of...an undertaking that would require by necessity the large-scale transport of VHLW by sea. The analysis contained in this study led to the conclusion that ‘coastal [VHLW] transportation accidents are...unacceptable.’”

“If a damaged VHLW cask were lost at sea in shallow waters, contact of the stainless steel VHLW canisters with highly corrosive seawater would begin almost immediately. Because the Type 309 Stainless Steel has been extensively sensitized...it will undergo pitting and stress-corrosion cracking at an accelerated rate, exposing the glass underneath within a couple of months.”

“...at a March 1996 meeting at the International Maritime Organization, the question of salvaging potentially damaged, highly radioactive cargoes was discussed. It became clear in the course of the discussion that issues specific to this cargo that may affect the feasibility of salvage operations have not been carefully thought out.”

“...until the industry provides a credible salvage plan that addresses these contingencies, the public cannot give much credence to industry assurances that salvage will be carried out.”

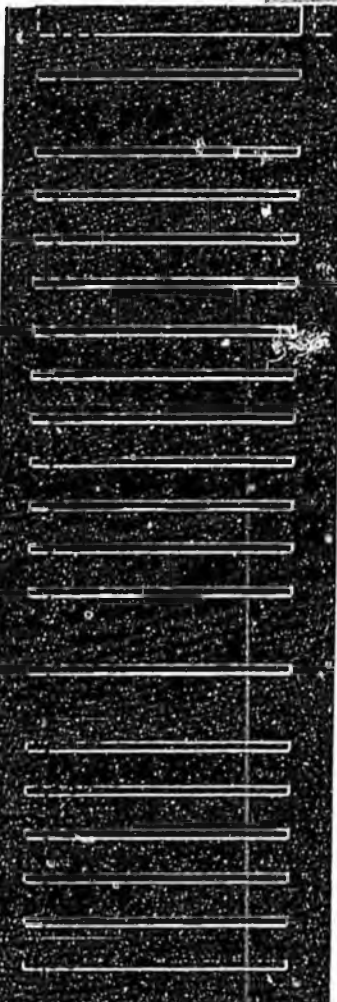
Conclusions

"The shipment of VHLW by sea is a practice with potentially catastrophic consequences for the inhabitants and economies of coastal states along the shipping route. In particular, the loss of a VHLW cargo ship in coastal waters, a credible event, can result in extensive radioactive contamination of the environment. However, the industry responsible for the shipments continues to refuse to provide to the public the technical basis for its assurances that it has reduced the probability of accidents to an acceptable level. In many cases, the technical basis does not exist. Given this situation, en-route states would be justified in not permitting the passage of these cargoes through their Exclusive Economic Zones."

Excerpted from a recent Department of State Background Paper regarding the potential transport of VHLW over the Northeast Route, en-route to Japan...

"...Specially-designed transport ships may have to be built...whether existing standards take sufficient account of possible exceptional factors in an Arctic environment could require review by the competent international bodies – the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO)."

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Nuke plan ripped as 'crazy idea'

NORTH SLOPE: The borough's mayor opposes the shipment of waste over the North Pole.

The Associated Press
(Published January 29, 2001)

FAIRBANKS Arctic North Slope Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak thinks the idea of shipping nuclear waste across the top of the globe is another example of how the world takes liberties with the Arctic Ocean.

"I think it's a crazy idea," Ahmaogak said.

Russia and Japan are negotiating a deal to team up and deliver recycled nuclear waste from western Europe to Japan via the Northern Sea Route, which mostly skirts Russia but also passes close to several countries and the Alaska coastline.

Ahmaogak is not swayed by assurances from Japan that the radioactive material won't be a threat in the event of an accident.

"We've already got a high incidence of cancer that we're trying to isolate right now," he said. "We don't need any more contaminants."

Though news reports about the concept are just making the rounds, people who study the Arctic Ocean have heard about the possibility of such a plan for a couple of years. Lawson Brigham, retired U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker captain, heard of the concept in 1999 while attending the International Northern Sea Route Programme in Oslo, Norway.

This route is an extension of the former Soviet Union's Arctic transportation system.

"They're extremely capable mariners," Brigham told the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner in a phone interview from his California home. The Northern route "has been open since '91, so why wouldn't the Russians want this?"

Greenpeace has sent releases to members of the Alaska Congressional Delegation and the state's media outlets.

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"It is difficult to say who is crazier: those who propose such a scheme or those who would agree to it," Greenpeace spokesman Tobias Muenchmeyer said in the release. "Both must be mad. The last thing the fragile Arctic needs is more nuclear contamination."

The Japanese Kyodo news service reported that the country's nuclear industry began negotiations with the Russian government after opposition toward shipping the waste along the major routes in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. The irradiated fuel is reprocessed at plants in France and Britain, then shipped to Japan.

The resulting glasslike material is highly radioactive. Proponents say when properly shielded it does not do much harm to the surrounding environment.

Kyodo reported that a test shipment will be conducted this year and that the first full nuclear transport is scheduled for 2002. Japan relies almost exclusively on nuclear power. The reprocessed fuel will power as many as 18 Japanese reactors by 2010.

The Arctic has been a logical route to the Japanese for more than a decade. In 1987, they wanted to fly nuclear fuel over the pole from Europe, using Alaska as a potential landing zone in case of emergency. Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, fought the concept and got it banned.

Murkowski said he isn't yet concerned about the proposed shipments.

"So far we have yet to see any sign of activity moving through that sea route," Murkowski said, referring to nuclear shipments.

It would be difficult to stop such shipments even if Alaska or the U.S. did have objections, he said. Beyond three miles, it's open ocean where ships from any country have freedom to sail.

Murkowski, who heads the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, isn't concerned about potential disasters in the Arctic. The glassified material is inert and its radiation won't spread if submerged in the ocean, according to information from Murkowski's aides.

Those kinds of reassurances don't do much for people like Ahmaogak. The Arctic Ocean is vital to the Native subsistence lifestyle. In the past half a century, he said, North Slope residents have watched their environment change because of global warming.

The sea ice, a launching platform for hunters, is disappearing.

"It's changed a lot," Ahmaogak said. "The ocean current has changed. We're seeing species we've never seen before. We're seeing porpoises, Greenland sharks, silver salmon, king salmon. We've never seen these things before."

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Anchorage Daily News

Arctic nuclear shipments just an idea, Powell says

LETTER: Secretary addresses concerns about Japan's plans.

By Don Hunter

Anchorage Daily News

(Published March 20, 2001)

Talk about shipping nuclear materials through the Arctic Ocean is just an idea at this point and "clearly years away" from fruition, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell says in a letter to Alaska Gov. Tony Knowles.

Knowles spokesman Bob King said Monday the governor is relieved to learn that "this is just in the early conceptual stages, where hopefully it can be quashed."

"Our concerns are still there," King said.

Knowles wrote to Powell and other officials in the United States and the Russian province of Chukotka last month after reports about the discussions between Russian shippers and Japanese power companies appeared in newspapers in the United States, Europe and Russia. According to the news accounts, Russian shippers have offered to use icebreakers to escort freighters carrying nuclear materials, bound from England and France to Japan, via a Northeast Passage along Russia's Arctic Coast.

Echoing concerns voiced by North Slope Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak, Knowles warned that spills of radioactive substances into the polar maritime environmental could have disastrous consequences. "Any accidental release of this material could have a devastating effect on the fragile Arctic environment and the health and welfare of the people who live there," Knowles said.

In his response, received by the governor's office last week, Powell said the talks so far appear to be limited to private interests.

"The Government of Japan has told us informally that, while it has heard of the preliminary discussions within the industry, it has never been consulted by the industry, and that any decision . . . to adopt such a route would require concurrence by the Japanese government," Powell's letter says.

"We have no reason to believe that any decisions on adopting an Arctic route are imminent."

Japan uses nuclear fuel to power some utilities and sends spent fuel to reactors in France and Britain for reprocessing. The new fuel and wastes from the reprocessing are returned to Japan. The exchange has been going on for about a decade, with freighters transiting traditional routes around South Africa and South America, but resistance has been growing among nations near those shipping lanes.

In his letter, Powell says the State Department will monitor the progress of the talks.

"If it happens at all, any use of the Northeast Passage route for shipments of radioactive nuclear waste is clearly years away, given the preliminary nature of the industry discussions," Powell says. "If this does become a matter of consultation between governments, we will be in contact to make sure the Department is able to represent the concerns you expressed effectively.

"In any case, we would expect, and seek to ensure, that sea shipments of radioactive materials over any route would comply with relevant international rules and standards, and that they would be carried out safely and without significant risk to the environment."

Reporter Don Hunter can be reached at dhunter@adn.com or 257-4349.

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