

# Canada considers using weapons-grade nuclear material

BY DALE LUM

VANCOUVER (CUP) — Somewhere near the American border, under cover of night, a plain-looking semi trailer rumbles along a US interstate highway. Nearby in armoured vehicles, heavily-armed federal agents watch over the rig — weapons poised. High above, an American military satellite silently tracks the convoy as it makes its progress north.

At the border, the U.S. agents pass through customs and hand the shipment over to Canadians waiting on the other side.

The cargo? Eighteen metal cylinders, each about the size of a small fireplace log, filled with thumb-sized ceramic pellets of uranium and weapons-grade plutonium.

This scenario may sound like an X-Files episode, but it's really part of a plan being considered by Canada, the United States, and

Russia.

The recipient of the plutonium, Atomic Energy of Canada Limited — the Crown corporation that manages Canada's nuclear research and CANDU reactors — will transport the cargo to the Bruce Nuclear Generating Station in Ontario to be used as reactor fuel.

The fuel, known as mixed oxide, is a blend of uranium oxide and plutonium oxide extracted from decommissioned nuclear warheads.

CANDU nuclear reactors normally use uranium fuel rods in fission reactions that generate electricity. But the U.S. Department of Energy and Atomic Energy of Canada propose mixing a little plutonium into the fuel used by commercial nuclear reactors such as those in Ontario. That, they say, would help eradicate surplus supplies of weapons-grade plutonium in Russia and the United States.

In 1996, Canada announced that in the interest of getting rid of weapons plutonium left over from the Cold War, it would make Ontario Hydro's CANDU reactors available for mixed oxide.

Supporters of the plan say it would be a major step toward nuclear-disarmament.

"If we see surplus weapons-

grade plutonium being destroyed by making electricity, this is a significant development in the area of world peace," says Larry Shewchuk, corporate media relations manager with Atomic Energy of Canada.

"We're taking nuclear weapons off the face of the earth and we're not just

destroying them, we're making electricity out of the destruction of them," he says.

Canada isn't the only country considering the plan, Shewchuk says. The US and some European countries also think it's a good idea and have expressed interest in using weapons plutonium in their civilian reactors.

But he stresses that, at this point, the proposal to destroy American and Russian surplus plutonium at Ontario's CANDU reactor is just one of several potential scenarios.

"We're an option, nothing more at this point in time," he said of Canada's involvement.

Questions also remain about whether CANDU reactors are suited for burning mixed oxide. A test run with a research reactor in Chalk River, Ontario, is planned to determine its performance and the completeness of the plutonium destruction. But there are logistics

to be worked out first, including how to transport the fuel.

Shipping large amounts of plutonium, one of the most carcinogenic substances known, requires the use of specially designed vehicles. Although extremely toxic, it gives off relatively weak radiation, mostly in the form of alpha particles.

But despite the stated aim of nuclear disarmament, anti-nuclear activists suspect there are other intentions behind the proposed plan.

Gordon Edwards, a professor of geomatics at Montreal's Vanier College, is a vocal opponent of the fuel.

He says the Canadian government, unlike the U.S., hasn't conducted an environmental assessment of the plan or even consulted the public about it.

"It appears that the Canadian public is not going to be consulted in any way until everything is in place and so much financial investment and political commitment has been made that it is virtually unstoppable," says Edwards.

A founding member of the anti-nuclear group Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility, Edwards says plutonium isn't nearly as benign as

Shewchuk suggests.

While he agrees that the ceramic pellets of the fuel would disperse very little plutonium in an accident, a successful test burn might lead to much greater quantities of plutonium travelling down Canadian highways.

"It's not just these individual shipments that we need to be concerned about, it's the question of what happens if this plan succeeds... then we are taking about something like one hundred tonnes of plutonium coming into Canada."

Despite the small risk of a radioactive release, Edwards says residents along the transportation routes should be concerned about large shipments of plutonium that might be passing through their communities.

"You can kill a tremendous amount of people with a very small amount of plutonium," he says.

One accident scenario, described in an environmental assessment by the U.S. Department of Energy as "extremely unlikely" but "credible," is a traffic accident causing a fire, a subsequent breakage of the fuel bundles and a release of tiny plutonium oxide particles into the atmosphere. Carried by winds, the plutonium could then disperse over a large area.

But Shewchuk says transporting mixed oxide along public highways is safe — and not uncommon.

He says Atomic Energy of Canada has been moving nukes around the country for over 30 years.

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