

Kalamazoo Gazette

Earthquake reminds us of dangers of storing nuclear waste beside lake

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By Kevin Kamps and Alice Hirt

The 5.2 magnitude earthquake on April 18, originating in southeastern Illinois but felt in southwestern Michigan, has revived our concerns that a powerful enough tremor jolting the Palisades nuclear reactor near South Haven could spell radioactive catastrophe for Lake Michigan and communities downwind and downstream.

Because of the quake, Entergy Nuclear-Palisades declared an unusual event to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, as did American Electric Power's twin-reactor Cook nuclear power plant 30 miles further south in Bridgman.

Two years ago, Don't Waste Michigan filed an emergency enforcement petition against the NRC, alleging the high-level radioactive waste storage facilities at Palisades, on the Lake Michigan shore near South Haven, violate governmental earthquake safety regulations. After the NRC rejected the petition, we appealed to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. Late last year, that court ruled against us.

Palisades now has nearly three dozen concrete and steel silos holding deadly irradiated nuclear fuel rods. The silos, called dry casks, rest upon two concrete pads. The concrete slabs are located upon loose sand amidst the dunes of the Lake Michigan shoreline. Some dry casks are just 150 yards from the water.

This earthquake is yet another reminder that Palisades' mounting radioactive wastes put our precious Lake Michigan at risk, and thus the drinking water supply and recreational destination for millions of people.

Each of the casks contains 240 to 320 times the long-lasting radioactivity released by the Hiroshima atomic bomb. We must stop Palisades from generating any more of these forever deadly radioactive wastes. We must safeguard and secure what is already piled up on the beach against accidents, attacks, leaks and even natural disasters such as earthquakes.

The NRC is ignoring the very serious risk that these slabs, and possibly even the casks, will shatter in the event of a powerful enough earthquake and release catastrophic amounts of radioactivity into Lake Michigan. Unfortunately, the Atomic Energy Act trumps all other laws, so the court ruled in favor of the NRC, allowing these risks to continue to be ignored.

Our long-standing expert witness, Dr. Ross Landsman, formerly served as NRC dry cask storage inspector at Palisades. He warned as early as 1994: "It's the consequences that might occur from an earthquake that I'm concerned about. The casks can either fall into Lake Michigan or be buried in the loose sand because of liquefaction. It is apparent to me that the NRC doesn't realize the catastrophic consequences of their continued reliance on their current ideology."

Nearly 200 years ago, the impacts of the most powerful earthquakes in the recorded history of North America extended into southwestern Michigan. Epicentered at New Madrid, Mo., the series of quakes in 1811 and 1812 are estimated to have been around

8.0 magnitude. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the probability for an earthquake of magnitude 6.0 or greater in the New Madrid seismic zone is higher than 90 percent by 2045. Such large quakes could cause a radioactive catastrophe at Palisades.

Kevin Kamps, a native of Kalamazoo, serves at Beyond Nuclear, a national watchdog group on the nuclear power industry headquartered in Takoma Park, Md. Alice Hirt of Holland serves on the board of directors of Don't Waste Michigan, a statewide coalition that helped stop Michigan from becoming a radioactive waste dump site for eight Midwestern states.