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Viewpoint

Regarding your article “6th District debate: Candidates discuss issues before a packed house at library,” on Sunday, October 05, 2008, by Kathy Jessup:

At Michigan’s 6th district U.S. congressional candidates’ debate last Saturday at the Kalamazoo Public Library, incumbent Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, said “[t]he French are recycling their nuclear waste and we ought to be doing it here.” France does reprocess its, and other countries’, high-level radioactive wastes. But we certainly should not do it here. Extracting plutonium from irradiated atomic fuel is about the worst possible thing to do, dramatically increasing radioactive risks.

Reprocessing causes an environmental disaster wherever it takes place. The French reprocessing facility discharges 100 million gallons of liquid radioactive wastes into the ocean every year, via an underwater pipeline. The radioactive backwash has contaminated French beaches, forcing their closure to the public. Elevated leukemia rates have been documented in the vicinity. Incredibly, contamination extends as far away as the Canadian Arctic. A dozen European countries have officially protested this ocean dumping, citing such risks as seafood contamination.

The U.S. has also experienced environmental nightmares downstream of reprocessing facilities. The only commercial waste reprocessing ever carried out in this country, at West Valley, NY near Buffalo from 1966 to 1972, caused severe radioactive contamination of the surroundings that will cost over \$5 billion to clean up. If the clean up does not occur, Lake Erie is at risk of disastrous radioactive contamination as the site erodes into the watershed over time.

Military reprocessing has likewise polluted sites in Washington State, South Carolina, and Idaho. Leaking radioactive waste storage tanks at these locations now threaten such major rivers as the Savannah and Columbia, and such major aquifers as the Tuscaloosa and Snake River. The grand total for clean up could easily cost hundreds of billions of dollars.

Which of the Great Lakes, or Michigan’s rivers and beaches, does Upton propose to put at risk through reprocessing?

Speaking of billion dollar boondoggles, guess who would pay for Upton’s proposed reprocessing? The American taxpayer, to the tune of additional hundreds of billions of dollars, according to the National Academy of Sciences and Department of Energy.

But the biggest risk of all is nuclear weapons proliferation. In 1974, India shocked the world by detonating its first atomic bomb. It had used U.S. reprocessing technology, along with a Canadian research reactor, to secretly extract plutonium from nuclear waste and insert it into a nuclear explosive device.

Gerald “Our” Ford, Republican President from Grand Rapids, responded in 1976 by banning the export of U.S. reprocessing technology for fear of further nuclear weapons spread. The next year, President Jimmy Carter strengthened the ban, prohibiting reprocessing in the U.S. to send a message to the world. This bipartisan non-proliferation policy has been credited with convincing such countries as South Korea, Taiwan, Argentina and Brazil to not reprocess their commercial nuclear wastes, which otherwise could have quickly led to nuclear weapons arsenals in those countries.

Upton’s support for “building additional nuclear reactors at western Michigan's two existing plants” is highly irresponsible given the lack of any safe, sound solution for the current reactors’ mounting radioactive wastes.

Sincerely,

Kevin Kamps
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