

November 14, 2000

Mr. Charles F. Stocking
1690 Chamberlain Road
Newark Valley, NY 13811

SUBJECT: OCEAN DISPOSAL OF RADIOACTIVE WASTES

Dear Mr. Stocking:

I am responding to your e-mail of September 6, 2000, to Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon, concerning disposal of radioactive waste at sea. Senator Wyden referred your request to us for response. In your correspondence, you state that in the mid-1950s, you observed barges carrying 55-gallon drums with radiation hazard stickers down the Columbia River. You also note that you later learned that waste dumping occurred routinely off the coasts of Oregon and Washington and that such practices were accepted means of disposal. According to a Government Printing Office pamphlet from the 1950s that you obtained at that time, the waste disposal drums would not rust through for 45-50 years, and in the meantime, silt would cover the drums to keep the radioactive waste from migrating. You are concerned about this premise, and ask if any attempt has been made to verify containment of the waste or to monitor for radiation.

From 1946 until 1970, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission contracted for and licensed disposal of approximately 90,000 containers of radioactive waste in four major dumping areas in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. A report entitled, "Nuclear Waste Management and the Use of the Sea," prepared by the National Advisory Committee on Oceans and Atmosphere (NACOA) for the President and Congress in 1984, provides an overview of ocean disposal of radioactive wastes, including amounts disposed of and their locations (copy enclosed). Most radioactive wastes the U.S. disposed of in the Pacific Ocean were placed near the Farallon Islands, 25-60 miles southwest of San Francisco. The NACOA report indicates that less than 900 of these containers were disposed of in the North Pacific off the coasts of Oregon or Washington. The NACOA report also states that it was widely believed at the time that if waste containers leaked, ". . .the large volumes of ocean waters would dilute and disperse the waste dumped at sea. . . and pose minimal hazards to man." Additionally, it cites later reports published by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and U.S. General Accounting Office that state that there is no evidence of harm either to people or the environment. Since 1970, the U.S. government has banned ocean dumping.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission does not have jurisdiction over ocean disposal of radioactive waste. However, we are providing a copy of your letter to Mr. John Malek, the Ocean Dumping Coordinator for EPA in its Region 10 Office in Seattle, Washington.

C.F. Stocking

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Mr. Malek can be reached at 206-553-1286, if you have further questions. I trust this responds to your concerns.

Sincerely,

/RA J. Greeves for/

William F. Kane
Office of Nuclear Material Safety
and Safeguards

Enclosure: "Nuclear Waste Management and the Use of the Sea"

cc: Honorable Ron Wyden, U.S. Senate
John Malek, U.S. EPA, Region 10

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cc: Honorable Ron Wyden, U.S. Senate
John Malek, U.S. EPA, Region 10

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