



MEDIA RELEASE

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MPs SHOULD NOT OVERRIDE NUCLEAR SAFETY REGULATOR

OTTAWA – In an open letter to the Prime Minister and opposition leaders, Greenpeace, the Canadian Environmental Law Association and Ecojustice (formerly Sierra Legal Defence Fund) today urged federal Members of Parliament not to override the decision by the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC) to shut down the nuclear reactor at Chalk River. The groups are calling for a public investigation of mismanagement by Atomic Energy of Canada Limited (AECL) in failing to commission replacement reactors for the fifty-year-old NRU reactor, and its failure to adhere to CNSC safety regulations.

“Canada’s Parliament has sent a clear signal to the nuclear industry: Canada’s nuclear safety regulator has no teeth or authority,” said Shawn-Patrick Stensil, Energy and Climate campaigner with Greenpeace.

Last night, all parties agreed to fast-track Bill C-38, which will allow AECL to bypass the requirements of the CNSC and restart the National Research Universal (NRU) Reactor at its Chalk River Laboratories, 100 km north-west of Ottawa. In November, CNSC staff discovered that AECL had failed to install emergency power systems to the 50 year-old reactor as promised, and required AECL to meet safety requirements before restarting the reactor, causing the cessation of radioisotope production.

"The Harper government and the opposition parties have put the fox in charge of the hen house," said Stensil. "The CNSC is typically a lap dog to nuclear industry. When it says a reactor should be shut down, there is clearly a significant threat to public safety."

Canadians are rightfully outraged by the current shortage of radioisotopes due to AECL's failure to properly maintain safety standards at the NRU reactor, but an independent regulator is needed to ensure nuclear safety. Any solution to the current radioisotope shortage must include a public investigation of the root cause - AECL's failure to build two new reactors on time and on budget. This forced AECL to ask the regulator to extend the life of NRU, which was set for shutdown in 2005 and shares design flaws with the Chernobyl reactor design.

"The bargain Canadian society has made to operate highly risky nuclear technology is that there is oversight by an independent regulator. While far from perfect, it is the only assurance the public has that nuclear plants are being held to a set of safety standards. Bypassing the CNSC on serious safety issues completely undermines the basis for nuclear plant operation in Canada," said Theresa McClenaghan, executive director of the Canadian Environmental Law Association.

"The existence of an independent expert regulator to oversee nuclear operations is essential," said Ecojustice lawyer Hugh Wilkins. "An immediate resolution of the radioisotope shortage is crucial, but it must not come at the expense of the independence and credibility of the regulator or the safety of Canadians."

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