

The Role of Peer Review in Responsive Decisions - A Case Study of Clean-up and Safe Long-term Management of Historic Waste at Port Hope and Clarington

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ABSTRACT

The Municipalities of Port Hope and Clarington ("Municipalities") are committed to leading the clean-up and safe long-term management of historic low-level radioactive and hazardous wastes deposited in Port Granby (in the Municipality of Clarington) and several locations in the Municipality of Port Hope. They are supported by the Government of Canada through Atomic Energy of Canada Limited's (AECL) Low-Level Radioactive Waste Management Office (LLRWMO). The wastes are the result of radium and uranium processing in Port Hope by Eldorado since the 1930s.

To establish the parameters of the clean-up, including the ability to veto the project, the local municipalities negotiated and signed a Legal Agreement with the Government of Canada in 2001. As a Responsible Authority, Natural Resources Canada has defined and approved the scope of the two projects. The LLRWMO is designated as the proponent. Accordingly, the LLRWMO is conducting the Environmental Assessment (EA) Studies and seeking approval of a preferred method of conducting the clean-up for each municipality.

The municipalities recognized that these large and complex environmental assessment studies would challenge the resources of citizens, municipal professional staff and politicians. Thus, the Legal Agreement specified that both municipalities would have funded staff to work together to coordinate and expedite the project. A Peer Review Team (PRT) would be retained by the municipalities and funded by the Government of Canada. The PRT is made up of experienced professionals led by Hardy Stevenson and Associates Limited in disciplines appropriate to the peer review tasks on hand.

The PRT has brought a unique approach to the peer review. The PRT is headed by planners and social scientists trained to be sensitive to the 'people aspects' of the EA process as a major priority. They are supported by engineers and technical specialists. The team includes a physician with a family practice who is also an epidemiologist.

The LLRWMO has provided the PRT with open access to all studies and project documentation and has been responsive in addressing all questions or concerns raised by the peer reviewers. The views of the PRT members are independent of the LLRWMO and the local municipalities. Reviews of the draft EA Study Reports and related studies are ongoing and iterative. The PRT clearly states where they agree and disagree with LLRWMO conclusions. Differences are discussed between professionals before final conclusions are drawn.

The PRT brings private sector discipline, objectivity and a depth of experience to the peer review. They have adopted a thorough, non-advocacy approach to reviewing EA studies including a 'pinch of scepticism' to ensure that the EA studies and reports receive a critical review. The PRT's deliberations assist municipalities to conduct their due diligence responsibilities.

The PRT has a visible presence in the community and is responsive to questions and concerns raised by individual citizens and local community groups. Through the municipalities, it conducts its own community consultation programs and reaches out to the community as an independent expert resource, even meeting with concerned citizens in their homes to hear issues or discuss community preferences. PRT reports and recommendations are open to members of the public.

The clean-up and management of long-term historic waste in Port Hope and Clarington is Canada's second largest EA process, and might be characterized by an outside observer as a thoughtful, rational and respectful dialogue about the issues among all parties. While many individuals, community groups and government organizations and the consulting sector have contributed to the progress so far, the PRT has uniquely assisted in building trust and understanding among all parties.