

## U.S. Allows Radioactive Materials in Ordinary Landfills

**TAKOMA PARK, Maryland**, May 14, 2007 (ENS) - Radioactive materials from nuclear weapons facilities are being released to regular landfills and could get into commercial recycling streams, finds a report issued today by the nonprofit Nuclear Information and Resource Service, NIRS. Radioactive scrap, concrete, equipment, asphalt, plastic, wood, chemicals, and soil are placed in ordinary landfills, researchers learned.

Contaminated by nuclear bomb production at Department of Energy, DOE, facilities, some of the radioactive waste is processed by state-licensed companies. In some cases it is "redefined" as "special" and then disposed of in regular landfills.

"People around regular trash landfills will be shocked to learn that radioactive contamination from nuclear weapons production is ending up there, either directly released by DOE or via brokers and processors," says lead author Diane D'Arrigo, NIRS' Radioactive Waste Project director.

"Just as ominous," she said, "the DOE allows and encourages sale and donation of some radioactively contaminated materials."

**Typical waste disposal practices used in the 1950s through early 1970s at the Y-12 area of the Oak Ridge Reservation in Tennessee.** (Photo courtesy [DOE](#))

This free release opens up the potential for the materials to enter the recycling stream to make everyday household and personal items or to be used to build roads, schools, and playgrounds.



D'Arrigo and her team researched what happens to radioactive materials from the DOE national headquarters and seven nuclear sites - Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Rocky Flats, Colorado; Los Alamos, New Mexico; Mound and Fernald, Ohio; West Valley, New York; and Paducah, Kentucky.

The state of Tennessee is the most active state in licensing processors that can release radioactive materials for the nuclear waste generators, the report found.

"Tennessee is serving as a funnel to bring in nuclear weapons and power waste from around the country to disperse into the landfills and recycling without public knowledge," D'Arrigo said.

The Department of Energy is charged with removing the radioactive materials from more than 50 years of energy research and weapons production at Tennessee's Oak Ridge Reservation. The program includes what the DOE calls "an aggressive effort" to complete the majority of the environmental cleanup by 2008.

The sheer volume of radioactive material the Energy Department's Office of Environmental Management must deal with is enormous. This agency is tasked with cleanup of the environmental legacy of the nation's nuclear weapons program and government-sponsored nuclear energy research.

One of the largest and most technically complex environmental cleanup programs in the world, the effort includes cleanup of 114 sites across the country, including those on the Oak Ridge Reservation.

On September 30, 2005, the Department of Energy announced that it had accomplished "a major milestone in environmental cleanup with the safe disposition of over one million cubic feet of legacy waste," from the Oak Ridge Reservation.



**A shipment of boxes containing radioactive waste departs the Oak Ridge Reservation for disposal off site. The shipment is one of hundreds that were disposed of on and off Oak Ridge as part of the Legacy Waste Disposition Program. (Photo courtesy [DOE](#))**

This volume equates to a football field covered more than 30 feet high. The waste consisted of radioactive scrap metal, contaminated soil, construction debris, organic liquids, waste water and sludge residue, the DOE said.

Bechtel Jacobs Company, LLC, the department's environmental cleanup contractor, completed the project safely and on-time, the DOE said.

But it is where the radioactive material goes when it is removed from the DOE sites that NIRS researched.

By permitting radioactive materials to go directly to unregulated destinations and to licensed processors who subsequently release it, DOE is enabling manmade radioactivity to get out into the open marketplace, landfills, commercial recycling and into everyday consumer products, construction supplies and equipment, roads, piping, buildings, vehicles, playgrounds, basements, furniture, toys, zippers, personal items, without warning, notification or consent, NIRS researchers discovered.

The NIRS report tracked the laws, guidance and technical justifications that DOE uses to rationalize allowing commercial businesses and recreation areas - places unprepared to handle radioactivity - to recycle and reuse these materials.

"DOE is ignoring public opposition to unnecessary exposures and releasing radioactivity even though the U.S. Congress revoked such release policies," said Mary Olson, director of the NIRS Southeast office and a co-author of the report.

"DOE is using its own internal guidance to allow radioactive weapons wastes out of control, claiming the doses to people will be 'acceptable' even though they are not enforced or tracked," Olson said.

Under the current system, the DOE and other nuclear waste generators release materials directly, sell them at auction or through exchanges or send their waste to processors who can then release it from radioactive controls to landfills, to recyclers or for reuse.

**The Disposal Area Remedial Actions Soils Storage Facility at Oak Ridge was built in 1989 to store contaminated sediments and excavation wastes. (Photo courtesy DOE)**



This dispersal of radioactive materials is being done without comprehensive complex-wide tracking, without routine public reporting of the releases from each site and processor and usually without independent verification that it is within the DOE's self-imposed limits, the NIRS researchers found.

"As long as DOE and other nuclear waste generators can slip their contamination out — letting it get out of control — On purpose — there is really no limit to the amount of additional radiation exposure members of the public could receive," D'Arrigo concluded. "Only an informed, outraged public can force DOE and agreeable states to shift the goal from dispersal to isolation of radioactive waste."

While approving of DOE's ban on recycling of radioactive metal from nuclear weapons, the report cautions there are loopholes and the Bush administration is considering lifting the ban.

Olson and D'Arrigo say NIRS is submitting a new Freedom of Information Act request to the Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security Administration to identify and quantify how much nuclear weapons generated radioactivity has been released, is being released and may be released and its destinations.

"Our previous efforts have only begun to answer these questions," they said.

Based on the information in this report, NIRS is calling for a comprehensive, permanent ban to be placed on release for recycling, regular (unregulated) disposal and reuse of all radioactive wastes and materials, including potentially contaminated metals and materials from all DOE sites and activities.

A copy of the full report, "Out of Control — On Purpose: DOE's Dispersal of Radioactive Waste into Landfills and Consumer Products," is online at:

<http://www.nirs.org/radwaste/outofcontrol/outofcontrol.htm>