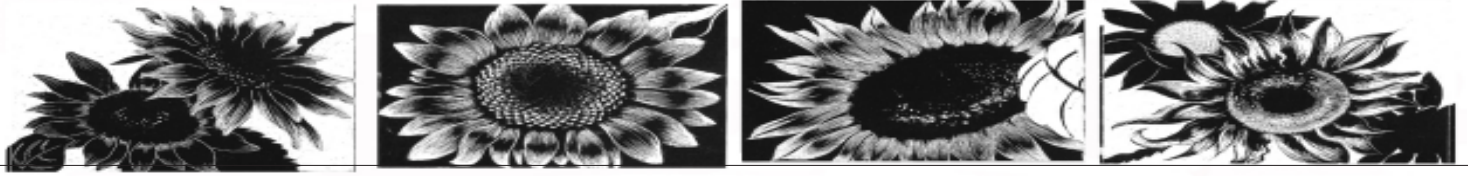


NUKEWATCH

QUARTERLY



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Radiation from Army's Barrels in Lake Superior?

By John LaForge

Questions about whether radioactive waste — specifically uranium-238, or “depleted uranium,” U-234 or U-235 — is contained in any of the Honeywell barrels dumped by the Army Corps of Engineers into Lake Superior near Duluth have never been satisfactorily answered.

Intriguing bits of documentary references leave the unmistakable impression that something emitting radiation is in at least some of the approximately 1,457 dumped barrels.

Nukewatch staff and volunteers have lately pored over records in the St. Paul offices of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and have only been made more curious by what we've found.

The process of researching the material is time-consuming and frustrating because the MPCA's files are a mess. Lists and tables produced by federal agencies or Honeywell managers contain obscure references, allusions to missing documents and undefined abbreviations. Some documents are missing hundreds of pages, some are misfiled under unrelated headings, and others contain references to reports or appendices that have not been retained.

One MPCA officer informed Nukewatch that he'd taken some of the material with him when he moved from the St. Paul headquarters to the Brainerd, Minnesota offices.

In spite of the difficulty of piecing facts together, the files raise questions.

Quoted directly from the MPCA's files below are references — often vague and abbreviated — to radioactive materials in the barrels:

* 1977 — “Honeywell first shipped quantities of depleted uranium wastes in May 1977. A purchase of April 4, 1978 covered the shipment of 9,520 pounds of depleted uranium mixed with cement in 43 waste barrels.”¹

* 1955 — “Date 2/7/55 — Radiation Data and Lake Superior Rad Dumping: Note from Honeywell P.O. (4/24/78); Monthly Historical Report (7/10/50).”²

* 1988 — “Some information about off-site disposal was available, but it was not evaluated for the purposes of this Preliminary Assessment.”³ *A handwritten note here says: “COE/Lake Superior WDE?”*

* 1985 — “Description of substances possibly present, known, or alleged: ... Uranium ... Ur234, Ur235, Ur238.”⁴

* 1985 — “Waste States, Quantities, and Characteristics: Toxic, Corrosive, Radioactive, Persistent, Soluble, Flammable, Reactive.... Potential exists for most of these wastes to be in the barrels”⁵

* 1990 — “Waste Characteristics: Toxic, EP Toxic, Reactive, Radioactive...”⁶

* 1995 — On its April 12, broadcast, KBJR TV, Channel 6 News (Duluth) interviewed Captain Harold Maynard (Ret.), the submarine operator who, in 1990, investigated one of the dump sites with his K-350 submersible. In this interview, Capt. Maynard alleged a “cover up” of the presence of radiation in barrels he examined, an allegation he maintains to this day.

Captain Maynard spoke with Nukewatch on May 9, 2008, from his home in New York. He said that from inside his submarine, a Corps of Engineers' Geiger counter registered radiation near one barrel, that the tether securing his sub to a surface ship was contaminated and made the Corps' Geiger counter click, that the Corps' Bob Dempsey “has been denying that ever since,” and that Dempsey would not allow him to return with his sub to the same place to verify his reading.⁷

* 1990 — Mike Stich, of Hazard Control, Inc. in Minneapolis (now All Safe), was hired by the Army Corps to help conduct the Oct. 12, barrel search. In an August 6, 1991 letter to the late John Pegors, former MPCA Region 1 Director, Stich wrote, “From the very beginning I was suspicious.”

“When the sub captain's Geiger counter went off and he surfaced, he was very excited and was sure that he had indeed detected something radioactive. The Corps down played (and even physically shielded him from the news people) the Geiger counter event.... I'm of the opinion that Harold [Maynard] the sub pilot did in fact detect something, he was very excited and almost scared when he surfaced that day.”⁸

Given this partial list of significant references to radiation being emitted from some of the barrels, it is curious that the Minnesota Department of Health could conclude, in its March 14, 2008 “Health Consultation” that “Despite one unexplainable and unconfirmed report of radioactivity near the barrels, there is no reason to believe that the barrels contained [sic] radioactive wastes.”⁹

What do you suppose it would take to raise a health concern at the state Health Department?

(Footnotes on page 7)