



Chief Lance Haymond of Kebaowek First Nation responds to a question as Grand Chief Lisa Robinson, Algonquin Nation Secretariat and Chief of Wolf Lake First Nation participates via videoconference, during a news conference in Ottawa on their opposition to a planned radioactive waste dump near the Ottawa River at the Chalk River Laboratories, on June 20.

First Nations raise alarm over impact of planned nuclear-waste dump on Ottawa drinking water

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Ontario and Quebec First Nations are raising the alarm about a proposed nuclear waste dump on their ancestral land, saying it risks polluting the Ottawa River, which supplies drinking water to the country's capital, with a radioactive substance.

First Nations chiefs are to travel to Ottawa Thursday to ask for an urgent rethink of the location of [the storage facility](#) – on a site the size of 52 soccer pitches – at the final project licensing hearing of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC).

They say, as stewards of the land, they are concerned about its potential impact on more than a million people who rely on the river for drinking water – as well as future generations.

Canadian Nuclear Laboratories wants to establish a storage facility for around one million cubic metres of low-level radioactive waste at its Chalk River site in Ontario. The new Near Surface Disposal Facility (NSDF) would be built just over one kilometre from the Ottawa River and across from a historic Indigenous sacred site.

CNL says the new storage site would not pose a risk to drinking water in any location downriver. But Chief Lance Haymond of Kebaowek First Nation last week wrote to the Prime Minister saying “radioactive waste stored less than one kilometre from the Kichi Sibi-Ottawa River is a risk we collectively cannot afford.”

“The Kichi Sibi holds immense spiritual and cultural significance for our communities and is at the heart of their ancestral land. The fact that the project has progressed despite its blatant disregard for the fundamental [Indigenous](#) right of free, prior and informed consent, as confirmed both by Canadian and international laws, further exacerbates the issue,” he said

Among their concerns is pollution of the Ottawa River with tritium, a radioactive substance that a new water treatment facility at the site would not be able to remove before the water is released and runs off into nearby Perch Lake.

Doug Odjick, a member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg council, questioned using Perch Lake as a dilution system for tritium as it flows into the Ottawa River.

“Diluting nuclear waste in a small body of water does not make sense,” he said. “We are concerned for all nations and life living off the drinking water of the Kichi Zibi [Ottawa River].”

Canadian Nuclear Laboratories says it is confident the upper tritium level will be well below Ontario’s water-quality standards of 7,000 becquerels per litre. However, it has requested permission for an effluent discharge target from the proposed storage site of more than 50 times higher than drinking water standards at 360,000 Bq/L. In England, for example, if concentrations of tritium in drinking water exceed 100 Bq/L, municipal authorities must carry out an investigation to identify the source and carry out risk assessments.

The proposed new disposal facility at Chalk River, the site of a nuclear reactor that opened in the 1940s and closed in 2018, is designed to safely store contaminated soil, building materials and equipment from the facility, as well as low-level radioactive waste from other nuclear sites and hospitals and universities.

In June, the Grand Chiefs of the Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation Tribal Council (AANTC) and the Algonquin Nation Secretariat (ANS), representing 10 of the 11 Algonquin First Nations, called for a halt to plans for the dump.

Chief Dylan Whiteduck of the Kitikan Zibi, and Chief Casey Ratt of the Algonquins of Barriere Lake are among those concerned by the plans. The Kebaowek First Nation in Quebec says Canadian Nuclear Laboratories should have involved it in the proposal years ago when it was first planned, rather than at the “tail end” of the project.

Justin Roy, a Kebaowek councillor, said his community thinks a further cleanup of the Chalk River Laboratories site is necessary, but he said the planned storage mound would be “in the wrong place.”

An ecological survey his community carried out this year of the 37-hectare mainly forested area that would be cleared has old-growth red and white pine, beech and oak trees, and is home to rare and protected species including Eastern wolves. It also has three dens lived in by black bears, including cubs.

“This is not just a problem of the Algonquin nation but all people on the Ottawa River,” he said. “Why are we trying to put a radioactive mountain adjacent to the drinking water of millions of people that are south of this NSDF site?”

Verna McGregor, a Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg elder, plans to explain at the CNSC licensing hearing how the Algonquins were bypassed in the establishment of the original Chalk River nuclear site on their unceded territory in the 1940s, and regard the river as sacred to their culture.

“What we are asking for is to move it away from the Ottawa River,” she said.

An assessment by hydrogeologist Wilf Ruland, for the Ottawa Riverkeeper, a charitable organization protecting the Ottawa River watershed, said the proposal would mark a significant improvement ensuring ‘legacy wastes’ are disposed of in a properly designed and secure facility.

His report highlighted the problem of very high tritium levels, which cannot be removed through treatment. But he concluded that tritium in the treated water “will pose no threat to the health of either humans or aquatic species.”

Meggan Vickerd, CNL deputy vice-president of Integrated Waste Services and Fuel Programs, said the modern storage facility would be a vast improvement on historic waste pits at the site. She said waste material with high tritium levels would be packaged so it doesn’t have contact with rainwater.

The storage facility would be built to withstand floods, tornadoes, forest fires, storms and earthquakes, she said.

“The NSDF is designed to protect the Ottawa River, not to harm it,” CNL said in a statement.