



Letter to the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board on Buried Transuranic (TRU) Waste

[href="/reports/cleanup/index.html"](/reports/cleanup/index.html)>CCWM Report

20 November 2000

Francesca McCann, Staff Director
Office of the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board (AB-1)
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Ms. McCann:

In reviewing the Nov. 9, 2000 draft report of the SEAB Panel on Emerging Technological Alternatives to Incineration, I noted that there was considerable uncertainty among members regarding the amount of buried transuranic waste at the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory. The Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER) has been discussing the problem of data quality regarding buried TRU waste and contaminated soil with the DOE since 1997, when IEER published a report on clean-up in the nuclear weapons complex. I am sending you three copies of that report, entitled [Containing the Cold War Mess](#), with this letter for the Panel's use and three copies of the issue of IEER's newsletter, [Science for Democratic Action](#), that summarizes the report.

I applaud the Panel for taking up the issue of buried waste, however briefly, and pointing out its seriousness. The Panel is entirely right to be concerned about the effect of buried TRU waste on one of the most important aquifers in the country and by far the most important one in the region. In addition, I urge you to note that the policy of spending vast resources on WIPP, whose net effect is to move to a repository waste that is relatively safely stored now, is depriving a far more threatening and pressing environmental problem-leaking, buried wastes-of the needed financial and technological resources and institutional attention that it deserves. We are all aware that there are political agreements in place that cause WIPP to be on a fast track, but future generations who have to deal with contaminated water resources in the West are unlikely to be forgiving of such a rationale.

In *Containing the Cold War Mess*, we showed that, with the partial exception of INEEL, DOE data on buried TRU waste and contaminated soil lacked any technical rationale, to say nothing of a sound scientific foundation. In June [July] of this year, Assistant Secretary of Energy Carolyn Huntoon, sent me a [letter](#) agreeing with this IEER conclusion, and also a [DOE report](#) with new estimates for these wastes. The DOE now states that buried TRU wastes are 30 percent of the radioactivity contained in the retrievable waste destined to be sent to WIPP, up from 3 percent in 1987 (page 2 of the June 2000 DOE report). Moreover, the current waste figures do not include information for contaminated soil, other than the fraction that was contaminated by liquid discharges. I am enclosing a copy of Assistant Secretary Huntoon's letter and the June 2000 DOE report. The latter is also available on DOE's web site. Ms. Huntoon's letter and [my reply](#) are on IEER's web site.



The table below summarizes the data in the June 2000 report. The data in the table are reported radioactivity data, uncorrected for decay. I have reproduced them below for your convenience and also so that I can provide you with some commentary on the data. Please note that the DOE's own assessment is that the quality of this data is still "low to medium" (p. 1).

DOE Estimates of Buried TRU-Contaminated Wastes as of June 2000, in curies (Note 1)		Site	Buried shall
		Hanford	67,8
		INEEL	634,
		LANL	21,0
		NTS	229
		ORNL	6
		SRS	21,9