Ominous-Looking Unidentified Object Found on Lake Superior Beach

By John LaForge

A local beach comber came across a startling object August 17 while walking on the Southshore of Lake Superior near Poplar, 18 miles east of Superior, Wisconsin. The deck-of-cards-sized steel object was stamped with the warning: "CAUTION - RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL" as well as the string of letters—C2O-O8-O. The metal was also stamped with a version of the standard radiation symbol which looks like a ceiling fan with wide blades. The alarmed hiker called the Douglas County Sheriff, and a deluge of official emergency responders soon descended on the small village.

When the story became public, long-time residents of the area called or emailed the Nukewatch office wondering about the Army Corps of Engineers and its dumping of corporate military wastes in the big lake in the 1960s and '70s.

The 9th District US Coast Guard office issued a press release from Cleveland, Ohio that noted "federal, state and local agencies worked jointly to determine the contents and source of a mysterious container found on the beach near the mouth of the Poplar River." However, none of the eight agencies involved were able to determine either contents or the source of the strange object.

The Coast Guard's press release said, "Initial responders from the US Coast Guard and Superior, Wisconsin, Fire Department determined the metal was not emitting any radioactivity. A follow-on investigation by the Wisconsin National Guard Civil Support Team and Wisconsin Department of Health Services ensured there was no radiation source from the surrounding area and that the object was not a hazard to the public."

First responders swooped into the little town (pop. 603) from Green Bay and Madison, both five hours away, to examine, take custody, and ultimately dispose of the mysterious item. According to the US Coast Guard, the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Wisc. Department of Health Services, the Wisc. Department of Natural Resources, the Wisc. National Guard Civil Support Team, the Superior Fire Department, the Douglas County Sheriff, and the Douglas County Emergency Management office were all involved.

The Coast Guard also said, "The object has been removed by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services for proper disposal." The reference to "proper disposal" of harmless, nonradioactive metal was not explained.

Nukewatch asked several participants about the unusual event and the out-sized response. It was the Coast Guard's Marine Safety Unit (MSU) in Duluth that first sent a team to the Poplar River site, along with the Superior Fire Dept. Lt. Commander Jerry Butwid of the MSU, told me his office sent a team to the site because, "We were 30 minutes away" while the EPA had to travel from Green Bay. Asked if the team identified the origin of the object, Butwid said, "No. We were just the 'eyes-on-the-scene'

and did some basic generic testing." Butwid said the Wisconsin Department of Health Services "had jurisdiction and they took it away."

Lt. John Mack at the Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit in Duluth said he knew of no additional photographs of the box that might aid in identifying its owner or manufacturer. "I don't believe we took that photo," Mack said, "maybe the fire department."

Steven Panger, Chief of Superior Wisconsin Fire Department (SFD), told Nukewatch, "We had a few other pictures, but they're the same," adding, "Actually those were from the resident [who found the object]. She sent them to us." The Coast Guard press release included one photograph of the item with the credit, "US Coast Guard photo," perhaps done to protect the privacy of the beach walker.

The SFD produced a routine incident report of the finding that included remarks by two members of the department's four-person Regional Chemical Assessment Team. Captain Andrew Knutson reported that while no additional markings were found on the metal, "It was however discovered that at some time the device appeared to be affixed to something and had been ripped off. The back side appeared to have been torn open revealing that the device was empty." Sgt. Ed Bunayon of Wisconsin National Guard's 54th Civil Support Team in Madison was also sent to Poplar. Bunayon, who said his unit "specializes in WMDs," thought the item "looked like a cover of something like a smoke detector. But it was old, nothing like equipment we see today."

Paul Schmidt of the Radiological Emergency Response section of the Wisc. Dept. of Health Services said his report of the event was not yet available. "We did an extensive area survey, to determine there was no radiation," Schmidt said. Jason Hunt who led the department's response team said Sept. 7 that the report was complete but being reviewed prior to publication. Both men said their investigations failed to determine the container's origin.

Without access to the various departmental incident reports, no connection to the Army Corps of Engineers' decades-long history of Lake Superior dumping could be established.

Plans for Increased Drinking Water Contamination Raise Alarm

In the summer 2016 Quarterly *we reported on the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) proposed weakening of drinking water contamination standards—known as Protective Action Guides—and urged readers to send comments.* ***Diane D'Arrigo****, Radioactive Waste Project Director at Nuclear Information & Resource Service, wrote this update on the status of the proposal.*

Well over 60,000 comments were submitted to the EPA by the July 2016 deadline, nearly all of them critical and calling on the agency to:

• Reject the water PAGs—the *not-so protective* Protective Action Guides—which would dramatically increase allowable radioactivity in drinking water for up to *years* after nuclear incidents. "Incidents" could be as routine as a radioactive release or a spill, or as devastating as a nuclear bomb or reactor meltdown;

• Require drinking water to meet existing Safe Drinking Water Act Maximum Concentration Levels for the weeks, months or years (the intermediate phase) after radioactive contamination "incidents."

Over 66,000 comments were submitted to EPA in total on both the 2016 proposed EPA Water Protective Action Guides (Water PAGs) and the more inclusive proposed 2013 PAGs, to which they are being added. The 2013 PAGs on all "pathways of exposure" include a 1998 PAG for food. EPA had said there was no PAG for drinking water, but a review of the agency's Food PAG revealed that in fact, drinking water *was included*. So the newly proposed Water PAG would actually *add even more* allowable radiation exposure from water, essentially doubling the exposure from food and water!

EPA is determined to make official both the 2013 "Protective Action Guides" and their proposed 2016 Water PAGs before the next Presidential Administration is installed—possibly before the election. The agency tried back when President Bush was leaving office but missed getting them finalized then, so is trying again.

The EPA is disingenuous in its promotion of this dangerous "guidance" in several ways. Two are described here:

First, EPA strongly implies the PAGs would apply to the *immediate* aftermath of a *huge disaster*, when in fact they apply to the "intermediate" phase of any radioactive "incident" …that "warrant[s] consideration of protective action." (Ch.1 para 1.1 of the EPA 2013 PAG; https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-06/documents/pag-manual-interim-public-comment-4-2-2013.pdf).

So the "Guides" would be preferentially used by reactor operators and others to avoid meeting the stricter Safe Drinking Water Act requirements. The new weaker PAGs would allow enormous levels of invisible but deadly radioactive contamination in drinking water for weeks, months or even years after a nuclear "incident."

This is a deceptive way to get around meeting the Safe Drinking Water Act Maximum Contamination Levels, Superfund cleanup levels, and the EPA's long-standing allowable risk range—giving cancer to 1-in-a-million or at worst 1-in-10,000 exposed. The PAGs protect the polluters from liability more than the public from radiation.

Second, these unconscionably high radiation doses from the Water PAGS will be *added* to very high internal doses from contaminated food we would be allowed to eat under the 1998 Food PAGs (www.fda.gov/downloads/MedicalDevices/DeviceRegulationandGuidance/GuidanceDocuments/UCM094513.pdf) which are incorporated into the 2013 PAG.

Individuals would be allowed doses of 500 millirem/year from *water* plus 500 millirems/year from food and water in the intermediate phase; plus internal and external doses (2000 millirem the first year, and 500 millirem the year after) from the air we breathe and from external direct gamma rays emitted from the radioactive sources, as permitted by the 2013 PAG. (www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-06/documents/pag-manual-interim-public-comment-4-2-2013.pdf; p. 7, Table 1-1)

Take action: There is still time to stop the 2013 and 2016 PAGs. Let your elected officials know you want them stopped and spread the word.

UN Working Group Calls for Negotiations in Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons Treaty Ban

Continued from Back Cover

Reacting to the OEWG's recommendation Anita E. Friedt, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the State Department's Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, defended what she called "progress" made by the US toward a nuclear-free world. However, current efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons have been led by states with vested interests in retaining them—the nuclear powers and their corporate backers who profit from maintenance of the status quo. This contradiction is demonstrated by the trillion-dollar program proposed by the United States to upgrade its nuclear arsenal over the next 30 years.

Ms. Friedt claimed, "We know that nuclear disarmament can only be achieved through an approach that takes into account the views and the security interests of all states. That is why we reject the final report …[which fails] to take account of the international security environment and will neither lead to the elimination of nuclear weapons nor uphold the principle of undiminished security for all. So, together let us reject division and instead agree that we share a common goal and recommit to the roadmap we are on, one that has proven results."

If US policy-makers truly took "into account the views and the security interests of all states," nuclear weapons would have been abolished long ago.

Actual elimination will be slow in coming. Depending on the results of the negotiations, the US and other nuclear-armed states will begin to feel increased global pressure to reduce their arsenals. But even when the US has become party to a weapons ban treaty, it is reluctant to stop its support for the military industry. The Chemical Weapons Convention entered into force in 1997, yet, according to CNN and the Centers for Disease Control, the US possesses 3,000 tons of chemical warfare materiel—roughly three times the amount held by Syria. The Convention on Cluster Munitions went into force in 2010. While the US did not adopt this treaty, as of Sept. 1, 2016 these weapons are no longer being produced here. Criticism over the use of US-made cluster munitions by Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and refusal by international financial institutions to include them in investments, has led Textron Systems to announce that it will stop manufacturing them. Textron's action shows that the stigmatization advocated by treaty ban proponents does have an impact.

Opposition to a nuclear weapons ban will continue from the weapons industry, nuclear-armed states and those states who consider themselves "protected" by nuclear-armed states. The next step toward the ban treaty is for the First Committee of the UN to issue a mandate in its October meeting to commence negotiations in 2017. If enough public pressure can be brought to bear, an overwhelming majority of UN member states is likely to prevail with a ban that truly "takes into account the views and the security interests of all states."

—*Foreign Policy*, Aug. 31; US Department of State, Aug. 29; Report of the Open-ended Working Group, Aug. 19; and PAX Netherlands, June 16, 2016; CNN Oct. 14, and Centers for Disease Control, May 9, 2014