

Department of Energy Wants to Let Radioactive Scrap Metal Back into Consumer Products

Government to Dispose of Radioactive Waste By Putting It In Our Silverware

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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The overwhelming scientific consensus is that [any amount of radiation – no matter how small – can cause cancer](#) and other serious health effects.

(Current safety standards are based on the ridiculous assumption that [everyone exposed is a healthy man in his 20s – and that radioactive particles ingested into the body cause no more damage than radiation hitting the outside of the body](#). In the real world, however, [even low doses of radiation](#) can cause cancer. Moreover, small particles of radiation – called “internal emitters” – which get inside the body are much more dangerous than general exposures to radiation. See [this](#) and [this](#). And radiation affects [small children much more than full-grown adults](#).)

But the Department of Energy – the agency which is responsible for the [design, testing and production of all U.S. nuclear weapons](#), [promotes nuclear energy](#) as one of its core functions, which has been [covering up nuclear accidents for decades](#), and has used [mutant lines of human cells](#) to promote voodoo, anti-scientific arguments – proposes letting radiation into our *silverware*.

Counterpunch [notes](#):

Even the deregulation-happy Wall St. Journal sounded shocked: “The Department of Energy is proposing to allow the sale of tons of scrap metal from government nuclear sites — an attempt to reduce waste that critics say could lead to radiation-tainted belt buckles, surgical implants and other consumer products.”

Having failed in the ‘80s and ‘90s to free the nuclear bomb factories and national laboratories of millions of tons of their radioactively contaminated scrap and nickel, the DOE is trying again. Its latest proposal is moving ahead without even an Environmental Impact Statement. Those messy EISs involve public hearings, so you can imagine the DOE’s reluctance to face the public over adding yet more radiation to the doses we’re already accumulating.

Congressman Markey [writes](#):

A Department of Energy proposal to allow up to 14,000 metric tons of its radioactive scrap metal to be recycled into consumer products was called into question today by Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) due to concerns over public health. In a letter sent to DOE head Steven Chu, Rep. Markey expressed “grave

concerns” over the potential of these metals becoming jewelry, cutlery, or other consumer products that could exceed healthy doses of radiation without any knowledge by the consumer. DOE made the proposal to rescind its earlier moratorium on radioactive scrap metal recycling in December, 2012.

The proposal follows an incident from 2012 involving Bed, Bath & Beyond stores in America recalling tissue holders made in India that were contaminated with the radio-isotope cobalt-60. Those products were shipped to 200 stores in 20 states. In response to that incident, a Nuclear Regulatory Commission spokesperson advised members of the public to return the products even though the amount of contamination was not considered to be a health risk.

This is not the first time this has happened.

As the Progressive [reported](#) in 1998, radioactive scrap metal was ending up in everything from [silverware to frying pans and belt buckles](#):

The Department of Energy has a problem: what to do with millions of tons of radioactive material. So the DOE has come up with an ingenious plan to dispose of its troublesome tons of nickel, copper, steel and aluminum. It wants to let scrap companies collect the metal, try to take the radioactivity out, and sell the metal to foundries, which would in turn sell it to manufacturers who could use it for everyday household products: pots, pans, forks, spoons, even your eyeglasses.

You may not know this, but the government already permits some companies under special licenses, to buy, reprocess and sell radioactive metal: 7,500 tons in 1996, by one industry estimate. But the amount of this reprocessing could increase drastically if the DOE, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), and the burgeoning radioactive metal processing industry get their way.

They are pressing for a new, lax standard that would do away with special permits and allow companies to buy and resell millions of tons of low-level radioactive metal.

The standard the companies seek could cause nearly 100,000 cancer fatalities in the United States, by the NRC’s own estimate.

(A couple of years later, Congressman Markey successfully [banned](#) most radioactive scrap ... but now DOE is trying to bring it back.)

Radioactive scrap is a global problem. As Bloomberg [reported](#) last year:

“The major risk we face in our industry is radiation,” said Paul de Bruin, radiation-safety chief for Jewometaal Stainless Processing, one of the world’s biggest stainless-steel scrap yards. “You can talk about security all you want, but I’ve found weapons-grade uranium in scrap. Where was the security?”

More than 120 shipments of contaminated goods, including cutlery, buckles and work tools such as hammers and screwdrivers, were denied U.S. entry between 2003 and 2008 after customs and the Department of Homeland Security boosted radiation monitoring at borders.

The department declined to provide updated figures or comment on how the metal tissue boxes at Bed, Bath & Beyond, tainted with cobalt-60 used in medical instruments to diagnose and treat cancer, evaded detection.

“The general public basically isn’t aware that they’re living in a radioactive world,” according to Ross Bartley, technical director for the recycling bureau, who said the contamination has led to lost sales. “Those tissue boxes are problematic because they’re radioactive and they had to be put in radioactive disposal.”

Abandoned medical scanners, food-processing devices and mining equipment containing radioactive metals such as cesium-137 and cobalt-60 are picked up by scrap collectors, sold to recyclers and melted down by foundries, the IAEA says.

Dangerous scrap comes from derelict hospitals and military bases, as well as defunct government agencies that have lost tools with radioactive elements.

Chronic exposure to low doses of radiation can lead to cataracts, cancer and birth defects, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. A 2005 study of more than 6,000 Taiwanese who lived in apartments built with radioactive reinforcing steel from 1983 to 2005 showed a statistically significant increase in leukemia and breast cancer.

India and China were the top sources of radioactive goods shipped to the U.S. through 2008, according to the Department of Homeland Security. Bartley, a metallurgist who has tracked radioactive contamination since the early 1990s, said there’s no evidence the situation has improved.

Two years after an Indian scrap-metal worker died from radiation exposure, the world’s second-most populous country hasn’t installed alarms, the Ministry of Shipping said in December.

“The same thing could easily happen again tomorrow,” said Deepak Jain, 65, who owns the yard where the worker died. “We have no protection. The government promised a lot, but has delivered absolutely nothing.”

Indeed, we are being bombarded with low-level radiation from all sides:

- Above-ground nuclear tests created [“background” levels of radioactive cesium and iodine for the first time](#)
- Countries dump everything from radiation from [nuclear meltdowns](#) to [radioactive submarines](#) in the ocean
- [And the air](#)
- In Japan, radioactive crops are [being mixed](#) into non-irradiated foods
- The U.S. apparently signed a pact with Japan agreeing that the U.S. [will continue](#)

[buying seafood from Japan](#), despite that food is not being tested for [radioactive materials](#)

- Much of our food is now [intentionally irradiated](#)

(The government has even [treated some people as guinea pigs](#).)

What can we do? Counterpunch notes:

You can tell the DOE to continue to keep its radioactive metal out of the commercial metal supply, commerce, and our personal items. You can demand a full environmental impact statement. Comment deadline is Feb. 9, 2013. Email to: scrap_PEAcomments@hq.doe.gov (with an underscore after "scrap_"). Snail mail to: Jane Summerson / DOE NNSA / PO Box 5400, Bldg. 401K. AFB East / Albuquerque, New Mexico 87185

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