

THE DANGERS OF RADIOACTIVE TRITIUM: Canada's Nuclear Energy Industry

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, April 15, 2012

[Sierra Club](#) 15 April 2012

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

MEDIA RELEASE:

Radioactive Tritium: CNSC Gives Industry A Licence to Pollute

April 11 2012 (10:00 am) For Immediate Release

Ottawa – Fearing the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission will again put the interests of the industry ahead of the health and safety of Canadians, four environmental organizations – the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility, Sierra Club Canada, Concerned Citizens of Renfrew County, and Safe and Green Energy (Peterborough) – held a press conference today to draw attention to upcoming hearing on a re-licensing application by Shield Source Inc. (SSI) of Peterborough, Ontario, and the CNSC's refusal to bring tritium standards up to date.

"Canadian allowable limits for tritium releases are far higher than the United States and Europe and appear to be set based on how much the industry is willing to invest rather than protecting human health," said John Bennett, Executive Director, Sierra Club Canada.

Tritium is radioactive hydrogen. It is an unwanted and dangerous byproduct mass-produced in CANDU reactors. Large amounts are released to the environment each year. Government and industry have sought to reduce costs by marketing tritium for commercial purposes.

Shield Source Inc, a privately owned tritium light manufacturing facility next to the Peterborough airport, is seeking a 10-year renewal of its CNSC licence, despite the fact that it releases large amounts of tritium to the environment routinely.

"In Feb. 2010, an enormous tritium spill took place from this facility. In just a few minutes, 147 trillion becquerels of tritium went up the stack – comparable to the releases from some nuclear reactors in an entire year," said Jeff Brackett of Safe and Green Energy (SAGE), a Peterborough group opposing the relicensing of the SSI facility.

"CNSC allows the licensee to withhold public notification on major tritium contamination findings for years, and CNSC staff trivializes the danger with ludicrously irrelevant comparisons," said Ole Hendrickson of Concerned Citizens for Renfrew County/

CNSC recently allowed N.B. Power Corp. to refill the refurbished Point Lepreau reactor with tritium-contaminated heavy water. "This guarantees unnecessary worker exposures and environmental releases of tritium for decades to come," said Dr. Gordon Edwards of the

Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility.

At Darlington, a Tritium Removal Facility was built to remove much of the tritium that builds up year by year in the heavy water inventory of Ontario's reactors so as to reduce worker exposures and environmental releases. Now this hazardous material is being sold to SSI.

"For decades, the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC) has ignored scientific evidence that tritium is more dangerous to human health than originally thought," said Dr. Edwards. "Tritium is at least two to fifteen times more hazardous than is allowed for in CNSC calculations – and the CNSC knows it. The agency has chosen to favor polluting industries by deliberately understating the hazard that tritium poses."

The CNSC has refused to change Canadian regulations despite recommendations from two independent scientific advisory committees in Ontario: ACES (Advisory Committee on Environmental Standards) and ODWAC (Ontario Drinking Water Advisory Council). Both concluded that current permissible levels for tritium in drinking water are 350 times too high.

"The ALARA principle – the CNSC's promise to keep radiation exposures 'As Low As Reasonably Achievable' – is evidently a hypocritical slogan," said Mr. Bennett.

The four groups are convinced that CNSC is not protecting or educating the Canadian public as the law requires. The Government of Canada is being notified by the groups that CNSC's behaviour is unacceptable and must be rectified. – 30 –

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