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Hazardous Waste Danger Ignored: Study: Ontario government accused of putting public's health at risk

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TORONTO (CP)—Despite generating and importing about two million tonnes of hazardous waste each year, Ontario still lacks comprehensive rules for handling and disposing of dangerous materials, a study being released Monday concludes.

“This situation continues to put health, safety and environment of Ontario residents at serious risk,” the study by the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy states.

“(It also) potentially exposes Ontario taxpayers to incalculable future clean up costs.”

One of the big gaps in the law is the lack of a requirement to pretreat hazardous waste before it is landfilled, as is the case in the United States.

While staff at the Ministry of the Environment recommended such a requirement almost two years ago, the government has yet to act, said Christine Elwell, a lawyer with the institute and co-author of the report.

“There’s just not the political will,” said Elwell.

Another problem is the lack of extended liability rules that force the original polluter to pay for the cleanup of a piece of property that has changed hands.

The study finds the amount of waste generated and received in the province fell slightly between 1998 and 2000, the latest year for which definitive data are available, to about 1.7 million tonnes.

However, since 1994, domestic generation of waste has jumped 35 percent and imports of American waste have doubled.

The recent decline is more likely the result of a slowdown in the U.S economy than a tightening of Ontario’s regulatory framework, the report says.

“There’s less economic activity and therefore less hazardous waste,” Elwell said.

There is also a concern that approval of a new incinerator in Kirkland Lake could reverse the modest decline, but the major problem remains the massive amounts of waste in the province.

“The overall increase in the quantities of hazardous waste generated and received in Ontario from 1994 to 2000 continues to be a disturbing trend,” the report says.

Surprisingly, the biggest receivers in the province of the hazardous materials are municipal sewage treatment plants. The plants take in liquid leachate, the toxic soup that drains from landfills, and may not be properly equipped to deal with it.

“Isn’t that outrageous?” said Elwell. “I couldn’t believe it.”

About 85 per cent of all hazardous waste in the province is produced domestically by municipal landfill sites, steel manufacturing facilities and chemical plants in southwestern Ontario.

Twelve per cent comes from the U.S., and about three percent from generators in other provinces.

Environmental Minister Chris Stockwell has previously noted that Ontario also exports significant amounts of waste both to other provinces and the U.S.

However, the report finds that Ontario remains a net importer.

“Ontario is still open for business in terms of hazardous waste imports,” said Elwell.