



MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Local Self-Reliance: Prohibiting Transport of Nuclear Materials in New York

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By the MOTHER EARTH NEWS Editors



Recent battles over the issue of nuclear waste storage serve as yet further examples of the current administration's "forked tongue" when it comes to conflicts between local self-determination and nuclear power.

PHOTO: FOTOLIA/RAVEN

The latest local self-reliance column covers the legal battle between the federal government suing New York on prohibiting transport of nuclear materials in New York.

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance works to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. Because we believe that city dwellers and country folks alike can profit from the institute's admirable efforts, we've made this "what's happening where" report by the ILSR staffers one of MOTHER's regular features. If you would like to know more, you can have a free catalog of ILSR's selection of books and pamphlets by ending the institute a self-addressed, stamped envelope . . . or become an associate member or a tax-deductible \$35 per year (\$50 for institutions) and receive both a periodic report on the institute's work and a 20% discount on all the group's publications. Write to ILSR, Dept. TMEN, Washington, D.C.

Ironically, the same administration that claims to support local self-reliance—and the delegation of authority from federal to state and community levels—is actually centralizing authority and preventing local self-reliance when it comes to such issues as nuclear energy.

Recently, New York City enacted legislation prohibiting transport of nuclear materials in New York. Concerned over the possibly disastrous effects of—and the potential for—accidents involving vehicles carrying such substances on local thoroughfares, the city council believed that it was exercising a clear right.

But the federal government disagreed . . . and so the United States Department of Transportation sued the city, arguing that nuclear power is a national issue, and therefore the federal government alone has authority to regulate operations (including the transport of materials). Fortunately, the courts decided otherwise . . . and upheld the Big Apple's legislation.

Recent battles over the issue of nuclear waste storage serve as yet further examples of the current administration's "forked tongue" when it comes to conflicts between local self-determination and nuclear power.

Several years ago, storage sites for radioactive waste were established—by federal mandate—for broad regions of the country. Generally, these sites are located in politically conservative, and largely pronuclear, states . . . such as South Carolina, Nevada, Washington, and Utah.

But the lack of certainty over the long-term security of existing storage techniques has caused even these states to express concern about dump sites. Last summer, for example, Governor Matheson of Utah told the federal government that—until an environmental impact statement could be developed—he'd do his best to stop any further attempts by the administration to establish a dump in that state's Canyonlands National Park. *[EDITOR'S NOTE: For further information on this issue, see the Friends of the Earth column in this issue on page 106.]*

Also, in August, Nevada's Department of Environmental Protection voted 4 to 1 to close its existing waste dump, leaving only two remaining sites—one in Washington and the other in South Carolina—in the country. But the Sagebrush State may well run into the same trouble Washington encountered last year when its legislature made a similar move to ban further dumping: The United States sued, and the courts upheld the federal government's preemption of local authority.

Nuclear power and democracy are, apparently, incompatible.

However, the contradiction between the administration's stated philosophy and actual deeds is not confined to the issue of nuclear energy. For example, at the time of this writing (early September), a bill is wending its way through Congress that will—if passed—give coal companies the right to seize private property on which to build coal-slurry pipelines. The firms argue that the pipelines would reduce the cost of transporting coal, thereby lowering the price of electricity.

But should coal firms—or any corporate entities, for that matter—be awarded the power to confiscate a person's property? As you probably know, that right was given to utility companies years ago . . . for generations, now, they've been allowed to take over private land on which they plan to build transmission lines. There was little resistance to the policy at first. But as the country grew, the wires carried higher and higher voltages and the towers became taller . . . and residents—fearing that the magnetic fields surrounding the crackling lines might damage the health of humans and animals—began to voice their opposition.

In fact, some years back, a virtual war broke out between local citizens and powerline construction workers in Minnesota. Farmers shot out glass insulators and overturned towers . . . and eventually the FBI was called in and built guard posts every few hundred yards along the construction sites, to protect the crews and equipment.

Of course, American history is fraught with examples of the tug-of-war between political philosophy and the demands of technology. Thomas Jefferson once envisioned the U.S. as a democratic nation based on the independent landowning farmer. Toward the end of his life, though, Jefferson had reluctantly accepted the economic value of big cities and altered his political vision of America: Our system could no longer be based on one-to-one democracy . . . instead, the country would have a centralized representative government.

Now, we seem to be at another such turning point in our history. Local self-reliance is a philosophy that carries with it a technical dynamic. The machines with which we surround our lives, the productive capacity we strive to build, can promote our independence . . . or undermine it. If, in fact, the Reagan administration is correct—that is, if the people of this country really do want decentralization of authority and responsibility—then all of us, including our leaders, will have to rethink our current dependence on technologies that by their very nature belie that democratic yearning.