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## **Pastoral Reflections of the Catholic Bishops of Alberta on Nuclear Energy**

We, the Catholic bishops of Alberta, wish to speak with the members of our dioceses and eparchy and all Albertans about the recent proposals to build and operate commercial nuclear reactors in our province. These proposals raise important issues which deserve serious discussion and ethical reflection. Debates about nuclear power can quickly become polarized. We encourage everyone to take the time to study this issue, and to examine critically the information presented from the different sides. We believe that there are serious ethical questions that must be adequately addressed before a decision is reached and implemented.

- Stewardship of the Environment

One major environmental impact of nuclear reactors is their consumption of substantial amounts of water. In Alberta, this most likely means withdrawing water from a major river in the province. Alberta's river flows are already being seriously challenged by demands from the oil and gas industries and other water consumers. Scientists are predicting that climate change may bring long term changes to the seasonal water levels in rivers in Alberta. Construction of a nuclear reactor will require a substantial water commitment extending at least forty years into the future.

### **Is there sufficient river water available now and into the future to meet the needs of proposed Alberta nuclear reactor(s)?**

The claim is often made that nuclear power can help in the struggle to reduce climate change because of low greenhouse gas emissions during nuclear reactor operations. However, several commentators argue that on a uranium fuel life cycle basis, greenhouse gas emissions associated with nuclear power are actually appreciably higher.

### **Will the introduction of nuclear power to Alberta contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases in the province? Are there better ways for Albertans to reduce their green house gas emissions?**

- Protection of Human Life and Respect for the Integrity of Creation

The operation of all nuclear reactors presents a serious potential risk to the life and health of human beings. It is telling that insurance companies judge this risk to be so serious that they refuse to provide full insurance coverage for a nuclear reactor facility. In the face of potentially serious risks to human health and to the environment that are difficult to quantify,

we see the wisdom of invoking the “precautionary principle” where caution, transparency, and a wide-ranging deliberation become an important part of the decision making process.

**Are all the potential risks to human life and the environment for the present generation and for future generations being adequately considered? Are viable alternatives to meeting Alberta’s energy needs that may present lower potential risks receiving adequate consideration?**

After many years of deliberation, there is still no official government approved procedure or standard for permanent storage and burial of radioactive nuclear waste. In the absence of such an approved standard, the resulting “interim” decision has been to opt for on-site storage of nuclear wastes year after year at local reactor sites.

**Should Alberta commit to produce nuclear wastes prior to having an approved plan for the safe and permanent disposal and burial of these wastes?**

- Stewardship of Public Resources

Major government subsidies have frequently occurred at different points of the uranium fuel cycle in Canada and in other countries. Cost overruns are common in nuclear reactor construction. Operating reactors may require expensive retrofits. Decommissioning a nuclear reactor is a costly process.

**Is this the best use of limited government funds, especially at a time when governments are facing major deficits?**

- Security

Nuclear facilities can become attractive targets for terrorism. Nuclear waste materials will need secure storage for many thousands of years into the future.

**Can nuclear reactor facilities and stored radioactive wastes be kept safe and secure for present and future generations?**

- Adequate Consultation

People have a right to participate in decisions affecting their own lives. For participation to be meaningful, it needs to be an informed participation. The Alberta government has commissioned and published a “Nuclear Power Expert Panel Report” drawing on the expertise of engineers, physicists and business professors. This information is certainly helpful. However, those making the decision to introduce nuclear power to Alberta need to hear from more than technological and financial experts. The expertise of other disciplines, including ecology, life sciences, social sciences and ethics needs to be drawn upon.

## Conclusion

The decision to introduce nuclear power to Alberta will have major consequences for all Albertans for many years into the future. Albertans need to be consulted in a meaningful way. Such a consultation needs to go beyond the recently concluded one month internet survey organized by the Department of Energy of the Alberta Government. A further sustained consultation is needed where all stakeholders can speak face to face with government decision makers in a public, transparent process. It is especially important that the voices of those living near the sites for the proposed nuclear power plants, including Aboriginal and Métis communities, be heard.

The Bishops of Alberta appreciate the need for an adequate and reliable supply of electricity in Alberta for today and for years into the future. The introduction of nuclear power in response to this need is not without serious risks. We strongly encourage the members of our dioceses and eparchy and all citizens of Alberta to take the time to study the issues associated with the introduction of commercial nuclear reactors, discuss their concerns with family, community and church members, call for and participate actively in public debates, and communicate their views directly to the Government of Alberta.



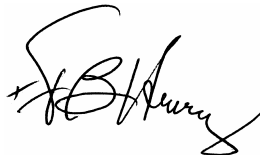
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