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Bechtel had no right discharging LOOW waste

BECHTEL NATIONAL INC., which the state claims discharged 700,000 gallons liquid waste from the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works into a ditch leading to Lake Ontario, has offered the usual reason for circumventing environmental controls — expediency.

Justification for discharging the waste without proper state permits was based on the concern that not doing so might lead to a greater problem. Rainy weather raised fears that the lagoon which contained the waste water would overflow and wash contamination from surrounding areas into drainage ditches. Bechtel, which monitors the radioactive waste storage site for the Department of Energy, maintains that the waste that was discharged was within federal and state permit requirements.

So what's the problem?

The problem is that what Bechtel did was illegal. It discharged waste water collected from a contaminated site and discharged it, albeit indirectly, into Lake Ontario without obtaining the necessary permits designed to guarantee the quality of what is discharged into state waters. What gives Bechtel the right to ignore the laws of the state?

We do not buy the argument that discharging the lagoon was the lesser of two evils. Couldn't provisions have been made to contain excess waste levels by a runoff collection or storage system until proper testing was completed? That, of course, would not have been expedient because it would have been more costly.

The issue of the permit also is one that deserves attention. An Energy Department official said inquiries have been made for the last seven months on what kind of a permit was necessary. The state Department of Environmental Conservation, however, claims Bechtel asked for permission on Nov. 9 to discharge the waste, but was denied permission until additional analytical studies of the waste were completed. The discharge took place two days later.

We can sympathize with anyone who receives a bureaucratic runaround, if that was the case. But even if it was, it is no justification for ignoring discharge requirements.