

## THE HOUSE

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Byline: JAMES FITZ-MORRIS

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

The House of Commons may be in summer recess, but that hasn't stopped M.P.s from descending on Parliament Hill. Two weeks ago, the Industry Committee met for an emergency session to look at Nortel. Last week, it was the Health Committee's turn to look at swine flu. This week, medical isotopes went under the microscope with the Natural Resources Committee. The delays continue with the N.R.U. nuclear reactor in Chalk River, Ontario; repairs are now expected to stretch into 2010. And that means that medical isotopes continue to be in short supply, and they're getting increasingly more expensive. Ontario's Minister of Health David Caplan broke it down for the committee yesterday over the phone:

DAVID CAPLAN (ONTARIO MINISTER OF HEALTH):

Our estimate so far is that direct cost to... additional cost to hospitals and clinics is in the order of one-point-seven million dollars. Additionally, we have invested in an alternative form of supply, approximately one-point-four million dollars toward the sodium fluoride isotope. The estimate that we have is that if things continue under the current regime, and that anticipates that there will not be a reduction in international supply, that by the time Chalk River comes back, we could well see a quadrupling of those costs between now and then.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

Atomic Energy Canada Ltd. was once again called upon to give an update on repairs to the Chalk River reactor, and once again, AECL president Hugh MacDiarmid was asked about the viability of resurrecting the Maple Reactors – you know, those reactors that were supposed to be producing isotopes more than a decade ago? Well, yesterday, the perennial question came from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources, David Anderson:

DAVID ANDERSON (PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE MINISTER OF NATURAL RESOURCES):

There's been a push by some people who really don't understand the situation around the Maples to suggest that they should just be started up, and "Get them up and running and get going," and I'm just wondering if you can go over again – I think it's important – why that's not feasible.

HUGH MACDIARMID (ATOMIC ENERGY CANADA LTD.):

Very happy to do that. Firstly, when the decision was made just over a year ago, that was based upon third-party advice and our own internal expertise applied against a very challenging problem, which was trying to resolve a technical and licensing issue that to that... up to that point in time, had defied resolution. When we looked forward at the pathway and said, "What do we need to spend? How long is it going to take? What kind of risks to we have to assume in order to go further and try and bring the Maples to a position where they are license-able?" we took the decision that it was not the right way for us to go. It wasn't an appropriate expenditure of taxpayer money, and it was, indeed, chasing a possibility that had a relatively low probability of success. And that decision and that judgment still holds, in our view. As a result of that, we did take the steps to bring the reactor into an extended shutdown state, and that's where it resides today, and there is no scenario we can imagine whereby the Maples could be brought out of their current state and be any solution to the near-term isotope shortage.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

Geoff Regan was at the committee meeting yesterday. He's the Liberal Natural Resources Critic, and he joins me in studio. Geoff Regan, welcome to The House.

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

Thank you.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

First of all, as we just heard from Mr. MacDiarmid, he's quite adamant that the Maple Reactors aren't viable solutions in his mind. Do you believe that he's mistaken, that this is an avenue that should still be pursued?

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

It's my view that, in fact, the government should be reconsidering its decision on the Maples. First of all, I think it's important to remember that the key element here is whether or not the government should have taken different actions over the past two years. We saw the shutdown in Chalk River in December of 2007 that was a month long, and at that time, doctors were saying it was a catastrophe. Clearly, the Canadian Medical Association now is saying it's... it's... you know, it's much worse. The question is did the government make the right decision in deciding to shut down the Maples a year and a half ago, because if it... according to experts we heard at committee previously, if it had decided to forward, we might very well be in a position where the Maples would be up and running now and producing medical isotopes, and we wouldn't be talking about this, because there wouldn't be a shortage. It's an important element to understand.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

But surely we can agree that regardless of what decision the government takes today, they aren't going to be up and running, the Maples, by the end of the year, so...

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

Oh, that's... there's no question. In fact... But Mr. Anderson asked that... asked the question as if people were suggesting that they could be turned on tomorrow and provide an instant answer to this. I don't think that's the point; the point is has the government been negligent in failing to take actions, you know, in failing to realize at the shutdown in 2007 that this might happen again and start preparing for alternative supply, and what we've seen is they haven't done that. That's a very... That's a grave concern. In June at the committee, we... we had a meeting where... where we had four of the... the country's leading nuclear physicists, including one that was proposed by the... the Conservative side as their witness. All four of them said the government should reconsider its decision. They all strongly felt that the Maple reactors were the way to go.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

But as we've agreed, it's not going to be up in the near-term, so we're... that means we're left with the N.R.U. for our current isotope crisis. Are you confident they're going to get that back up and running in the timeframe that they've now set out, early next year?

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

Well, I... I certainly hope that the N.R.U. gets back up and running by the first quarter or the end of the first quarter of 2010, as they're suggesting, but again, they would not be pinned down to any certain date, any maximum outside date, and what's worrisome is that when this... when the reactor first shut down in May, we were hearing we'd be shut down for a month, and then they were saying not more than... or perhaps about three months, and then... In fact, that was at our last meeting in June we heard that from A.E.C.L. A few weeks later, after the House had risen and Members of Parliament weren't around anymore, in early July, A.E.C.L. announced, in fact, that it was looking at a much longer shutdown, possibly until the end of 2009, and since then, we've had this announcement that... somewhere into the first quarter of 2010. So as much as I want to be hopeful, it's hard to have confidence that they can give us any... any certainty about when it can be up and running again.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

So, I mean, the committee that we heard yesterday, the focus was the Chalk River facility, what's going to be done there, either it be Maple or N.R.U. Maples are out for this current crisis; N.R.U., yourself included, many are skeptical about that. So is it time to start broadening the search to look for solutions, sources of isotopes other than the Chalk River facility?

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

Let me be clear that I remain very hopeful that the N.R.U. can be operational again and operate for a number of years, but either way, we have to think about what's... what's the answer for the long term, and we have conflicting statements from the government on that. I mean, we had them saying that they're spending hundreds of millions of dollars to... to get the N.R.U. up and running, but we have the Prime Minister saying that he wants to get out of the... the isotope business entirely, in spite of the fact that this is a business in which Canada has been a world-leader! And it's... to me, it's very disturbing that you would, at the same time as they're talking about selling off A.E.C.L., during a recession, at fire-sale prices... that you would also say, " We're not going to be in this business of isotopes, in which we have world-leading expertise."

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

The committee met on this subject in June, as you mentioned. Some of the same people were heard from then. There's others that were on your wish-list that weren't able to be heard from today that were there in June. What was the urgency? Why did this committee meeting have to be held this week?

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

Well, there's a big change between what we heard in June, which was that the N.R.U. might be up and running, because you're talking about May, June, July, that's a three-month period, and hearing it won't be till sometime next year, and we've seen, in terms of patients across the country, people who are relying on these... this technology, relying on medical isotopes to find out whether they have cancer, to have treatments for heart ailments. People are... are experiencing the impact of what is really a crisis, and I think it's our responsibility to... to find out what's happening, to hear from the leading experts in this field, and for the government to manoeuvre to make sure that no one who is critical of them, particularly the frontline doctors and... who deal with this every day, would be there I think is atrocious.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

So you... I mean, you've clearly left this meeting wanting more. This is the third such committee hearing held in as many weeks. We hear rumours the coming week holds some more. Is the summer break over?

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

(Laughs) Well, I think some people have the impression, of course, that for M.P.s, when the House rises, you're on vacation, and, of course, people who live in your constituency expect you to be... to be there and working for them and seeing them in your office, which of course you do, so the summer week... summer break is shorter than people think, I think, sometimes, to begin with, and I wouldn't be surprised if there are more committee meetings this summer before the House sits again.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

Geoff Regan, thanks for your time.

GEOFF REGAN (LIBERAL NATURAL RESOURCES CRITIC):

Thank you.

JAMES FITZ-MORRIS (HOST):

Geoff Regan is the Liberal Natural Resources Critic and Member of Parliament for Halifax West. We asked four Conservative Members of the Natural Resources Committee for an interview, but no one was available.