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Dioxin dump remains a threat

The recent approval by an American court of a modest scheme to contain the controversial Hyde Park dump in upper New York state — the site of over 80,000 tons of toxic chemicals, including one ton of deadly dioxin — is far from reassuring.

While an agreement hammered out between the American Environmental Protection Agency and the owner of the dump, Hooker Chemical and Plastic Co. of Niagara Falls, N.Y., calls for a waterproof cap for the 14-acre dump as well as ongoing monitoring of the area, it does not provide for the removal of the offending chemicals. Nor does it offer much hope that underground seepage from the dump might not continue in the future. The fact that the agreement was sanctioned by U.S. district court judge John Curtin will hardly allay environmental fears.

This U.S. response to a problem that could affect the drinking water of over six million people on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border is woefully inadequate. Jurisdiction over the matter lies squarely with the Americans, of course, but Canadian government officials — both provincial and federal — should continue to press for a more satisfactory clean up of the dump.

Over the years, the Hyde Park dump has been a constant source of irritation. The Hooker Chemical Co., which dumped the toxic wastes into the landfill site near the Niagara Gorge in the years after World War II, contends there is no evidence of contamination further than 1,200 feet from the huge dump.

Nevertheless, small amounts of dioxin — the deadliest chemical known to man — have found their way into the Niagara River and Lake Ontario and many U.S. and Canadian scientists believe they emanated from Hyde Park dump.

The major point of debate over the years has been the state of the bedrock lying under the Hyde Park dump. Federal and state officials in the U.S., along with Hooker witnesses, testified at a federal court hearing conducted last year by Curtin that the bedrock is solid and not leaking chemicals. But Canadian experts from the federal environment ministry, Pollution Probe

and the Canadian Environmental Law Association argue that the rock is far from stable.

Judge Curtin didn't agree. In his judgment last week, Curtin approved a Hooker scheme for simply capping the dump, along with a monitoring plan and a clean up of the existing pollution in the area.

Federal environment minister John Roberts has stated he's disappointed and upset over the U.S. decision. While he's obviously not in the position to reverse it, he and Ontario environment minister Keith Norton should redouble their efforts to negotiate more effective measures with American officialdom.