A plan to ship radioactive waste through the Great Lakes has received a flurry of criticism over the past year, but in February, it secured the approval of a key federal regulatory commission in Canada.

In issuing the transport license and certificate to Bruce Power, a private nuclear-generating company, the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission said the proposed shipment of 16 steam generators containing radioactive materials can be completed safely and that the risk to people and the environment is negligible.

Others aren’t so sure.

According to the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, a bi-national coalition of more than 70 mayors from the region, the Bruce Power proposal would set a regrettable precedent for what kind of shipments are allowed in the Great Lakes system.

The region’s mayors say the plan calls for the transport of 1,600 tons of radioactive equipment and waste — a figure that exceeds the International Atomic Energy Agency’s safety standard for inland waters. They add that an accidental spill in certain parts of the Great Lakes could exceed federal standards for radioactivity in drinking water.

Approval of such a shipment requires approval from the U.S. government as well. In October 2010, seven U.S. senators from the Great Lakes region wrote a letter to the U.S. Department of Transportation expressing their concerns about the Bruce Power proposal. The DOT’s Pipelines and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) is the regulatory body that makes decisions on the transportation of hazardous materials.

In its letter back to the senators, the federal agency noted that it has previously authorized the domestic shipment of more than 80 components removed from service from U.S. nuclear plants.

“Many of these components were significantly larger and heavier than the Bruce Power steam generators,” PHMSA Administrator Cynthia Quartermann said in the letter.

She added that “radioactive material shipments are transported routinely in U.S. waters,” including a shipment on Lake Michigan from a nuclear power plant in northern Wisconsin to Tennessee.
Bruce Power wants to send the steam generators to Sweden for recycling and to reduce their volume.