CMS cares about money, not environment

To the Editor:

Recent "environmental" looking PR advertisements in various Northwest Michigan newspapers and CMS Lands' Web site are being used to promote a proposed injection well in Star Township "as a safe, 'cost-effective' solution to the disposal of contaminated wastewater originating from Bay Harbor."

The origin of the contaminated wastewater problem begins in 1994 when the developers, which include two subsidiaries of CMS Energy, sought a "cost effective" way to develop Bay Harbor and received a covenant not to sue from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in exchange for undertaking certain closure activities. In 2004, for "technical reasons" CMS stopped treating the contaminated wastewater being collected leading to a visible release of highly caustic pH leachate and metal (mercury and arsenic) into Lake Michigan.

Presently the contaminated wastewater is first treated on site; then part is transported by truck to the Grand Traverse Wastewater Treatment Plant for further treatment before being discharged. CMS, as part of its "cost effective" plan, wants to bypass this additional treatment using the rationale that, "Trucking the treated water off-site is not an ideal, cost-effective, long-term solution because it increases truck traffic on Northwest Michigan roads." However, CMS does not explain exactly how using the injection well will reduce truck traffic as the contaminated wastewater will still be trucked to the well. CMS avoids explaining why fully treated water discharged from a treatment plant is not environmentally safer than injecting partially-treated contaminated wastewater into the ground.

CMS claims the well will be safe. Keep in mind it was CMS Energy or its subsidiaries that developed and implemented the prior 'safe' plan of burying the CKD piles and collection of contaminated wastewater which have now failed. Based upon past experience at this site, who can insure the proposed injection well will work as planned, will be safe as promised or will not also fail due to "technical reasons?"

In the 1880s the Antrim Iron Company began disposing of industrial waste in a matter which was believed to be safe by the standards of the day. A hundred years and 18 million plus dollars later, the citizens of Antrim are all too familiar with "cost effective" and "safe" disposal standards of the day — the Tar Lake clean up. Compare the clean up costs for that project to the $40,000 line of credit Beeland is required to have only for the for closure of the well but nothing for clean-up. In a hundred years will our descendants be looking back, shaking their heads in disbelief saying, "what were they thinking?"

CMS promotes Bay Harbor as providing 700 jobs, contributing more than $110 million in taxes and more than $40 million in wages and services since its inception. All may be true, but Antrim Iron in its day also contributed jobs, taxes and wages. The questions CMS leaves unanswered: How many jobs will be created in Antrim County? How many millions of taxes will be generated in Antrim County? How many million of dollars in wages will be generated in Antrim County? Who will pay for the clean up if this plan also fails for technical reasons?

The contaminated wastewater is generated from water migrating through several large buried CKD piles, some of which are under a member's only 27-hole golf course. EPA reports leachate is being intercepted each day in ranges between 90,000 and 200,000 gallons. During the golf season, millions and millions of gallons of water are applied to the golf course. It is common sense that this would increase the water migration through the CKD piles only to then become pH and metal laden contaminated wastewater. If true, would not it be logical, at least as a partial solution, to reduce or eliminate this water usage? But then, I am not an environmental scientist so I cannot speak to the science, but only as to what appears to be common sense.

In an attempt to improve CMS' image of being an environmental steward in its clean up efforts at the Little Traverse Bay CKD Release its recent PR campaign uses terms like "Little Traverse Bay Environmental Project" or "Cleaning Our Shores – Protecting Our Bay" with a "cost effective" plan. "Cost-effective" remedy is but a corporate euphemism for cheaper. Perhaps being monetarily "cost-effective" in the past as opposed to "environmentally effective" is in part what has led to today's problem. Instead of PR ads and Web sites ballyhooing images of environmental stewardship and responsibility, would not we all be better served by genuine stewardship as opposed to "cost effective" stewardship?

—Charles H. Koop
Williamsburg

Editor's note: Koop provided citations with the facts of this letter, which cannot be used in our newspaper format. Koop is the prosecuting attorney for Antrim County but is not writing this piece in that capacity.