

Nuclear Waste Battle Heats Up

Dave Eberhart, NewsMax.com

Monday, Jan. 28, 2002

During Campaign 2000 George W. Bush declared that as president he would decide the suitability of the controversial Yucca Mountain, Nev. nuclear waste burial ground based on "sound science."

With Energy Secretary Spenser Abraham on the cusp of sending a positive recommendation to his boss on what would be the nation's long awaited repository for the detritus of nuclear power generation, some, including the General Accounting Office are questioning the adequacy of that science. Others say that consolidating and safeguarding radioactive waste that could wind up in an enemy's "dirty nuke," is an imperative of national security.

More than 40,000 tons of highly radioactive reactor waste percolate in storage tanks at nuclear power plants in 31 states -- with the amount growing by 2,000 tons annually.

When, and if, waste ever arrives at Yucca Mountain, it would be placed in tall chambers carved from the side of a five-mile underground tunnel. Designs call for the chambers to be filled with 70,000 metric tons of waste over 24 years before being plugged up with concrete.

Last month, the GAO noted in a report that once Bush considers the site qualified for a license application and recommends the site to the Congress, the Nuclear Waste Policy Act requires the Department of Energy to submit a license application to NRC within about five to eight months.

According to the GOA report, however, DOE will not be able to submit an acceptable application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission within the express statutory time frames for several years because it will take that long to resolve many technical issues. "Specifically, DOE is currently gathering and analyzing technical information required to satisfy 293 agreements that it made with NRC."

"According to NRC," said the report, "completing this ongoing technical work is essential for it to accept a license application from DOE. Some of these agreements, for example, provide for the additional study of how water would flow through the repository area to the underlying groundwater and the durability of waste containers to last for thousands of years."

Public Relations Battle

In the meantime, a fierce public relations battle rages over the desolate mountain site. Nevadans believe their state was chosen because it is sparsely populated and lacked the clout to fight back. Furthermore, there are no nuclear plants in the state, making the issue of waste a foreign problem.

Opponents point to the hazards attendant to 143,000 over-the-road shipments hauling 77,000 tons of nuclear waste through hundreds of major cities and thousands of communities across the nation en route to Yucca Mountain.

But former Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro said she joined the proponents because the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks convinced her nuclear wastes should

be consolidated in one place. Ferraro and former Republican New Hampshire governor John Sununu are heading a public campaign in favor of building the facility.

Last week, Ferraro was sent a letter endorsed by 19 groups opposing Nevada nuclear waste burial and urging her to resign as spokeswoman for the pro-Yucca campaign headed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

In the letter, the environmental organizations cited outstanding health, safety and transportation questions involved in moving highly radioactive waste to Nevada and keeping it safely stored for more than 10,000 years.

"You say that as a mother and a grandmother you are sensitive to the legacies we leave our children. Residents of Nevada are deeply concerned about the legacy of contamination that the proposed repository would leave future generations," the groups said.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., is on record as pronouncing, "As long as we're in the majority, it's [Yucca] dead." But Whip Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., also a strong opponent conceded, "It's going to be a tough deal" to overturn Bush if he goes along with Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham.

Abraham disclosed recently that he would advise the president that the Yucca Mountain site, 90 miles from Las Vegas, is a "scientifically sound and suitable" site to bury the nation's nuclear waste. Abraham unexpectedly showed up at a Las Vegas hearing on Yucca last month.

The federal government started out studying a handful of possible repositories in Washington, Texas and Kansas. Several years ago, however, Congress told the Department of Energy to put all its efforts into Yucca Mountain.

Yucca Mountain, adjacent to the Nevada Test Site of Cold War fame, has already been the subject of a dozen years of study, costing more than \$6.8 billion.

Despite it's national defense implications, so far Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge has stayed out of the Yucca controversy, focusing on buttressing security at the nation's nuclear facilities.

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