

DoE Decision on Yucca Mountain a Mistake

By Carah Ong, Nuclear Age Peace Foundation

On 10 January, Department of Energy Secretary Spence Abraham made a recommendation that Yucca Mountain, Nevada be developed into the country's repository for high-level atomic waste. Although there is intense earthquake and volcanic activity at the site, risks of transporting the highly radioactive wastes cross-country, as well as the proposed dump's huge and still rising costs, the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation believes the decision is based on providing welfare nuclear lobby and the utilities that operate the plants.

In the past 25 years alone, well over 600 earthquakes of 2.5 or greater on the Richter Scale have struck within 50 miles of Yucca Mountain. In 1992, a 5.6 quake cracked walls, shattered windows, and did a million dollars damage to the Department of Energy (DOE) field office studying the site. A 1999 quake derailed a train on a railway that could be used to haul nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain.

DoE studies show that the Yucca Mountain Project would require decades to transport many tens of thousands of high-level atomic waste train and truck shipments through 45 States past the homes, schools, and workplaces of 50 million Americans. DoE calculated that a severe accident releasing radiation in a rural area would contaminate 42 square miles, costing \$620 million and taking 15 months to clean up.

On May 16, 2001 President George W. Bush presented his Administration's National Energy Policy, the product of a controversial task force headed by Vice President Dick Cheney. With Energy Secretary Abraham and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christie Todd Whitman standing beside him, Bush called for the construction of new nuclear power reactors for the first time in decades. Bush called upon his Cabinet officials to expedite the repository approval process. EPA released its Yucca Mountain regulations just three weeks later. Several environmental groups have sued EPA, charging that the regulations are much too weak and threaten public health and safety.

The US General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of Congress, urged the Bush administration in November to indefinitely postpone a decision on creating a permanent nuclear waste storage site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada because of serious questions regarding if it could ever be built as it is currently conceived. The site, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, has been the Department of Energy's (DoE) only candidate for a permanent nuclear waste repository for some 20 years. The site would hold up to 78,000 tons of radioactive waste.

The new GAO report states that it will take until January 2006 to complete the detailed research and cost estimates, and to resolve outstanding issues before the administration could responsibly designate the site. According to the report, "[The] DoE is not ready to make a site recommendation because it does not yet have all the technical information needed for a recommendation and a subsequent license application." Furthermore, the report also warns that officials may be showing plans to lawmakers and Nevada residents that "may not describe the facilities that the DoE would actually develop."

Abraham's recommendation sends the Yucca Mountain decision to the White House. The decision would then go to the U.S. Congress, where Assistant Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada has vowed to attempt to block it in the Senate. Even if approved by Congress, the State of Nevada and environmental groups have vowed to battle it in the Courts. Three lawsuits against the Yucca Mountain repository are already under way.

The best alternative to Yucca Mountain is to stop making nuclear waste. The tons of high-level radioactive waste produced annually by nuclear power reactors poses great danger to our generation and generations to come. Renewable energy forms protect the environment, are practical, and are increasingly economical alternatives to the use of nuclear energy. While nuclear waste already exists, creating more nuclear waste without having a safe or scientifically credible means of disposal is simply irresponsible.

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