

Yucca Dumping Delayed

By Bonnie Urfer

Nevada has been targeted as the dumping ground for radioactively and thermally hot waste fuel rods extracted from commercial nuclear reactors.

Opponents of the Yucca Mountain site considered a July 2004 federal ruling a narrow victory when a court ordered tougher safety standards. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia voided the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 10,000-year containment period for the repository, calling it inadequate. (See Fall '04 *Pathfinder*.) The EPA must rewrite a 4-million page, 45-volume license application. Despite the obstacles, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and Department of Energy (DOE) still hope to have Yucca Mountain licensed by the end of 2005.

The EPA wants scientists to declare that Yucca is safe. The National Academy of Scientists (NAS) has been studying computer models trying to determine what will happen in the future, say 10,000 to 100,000 years from now, with casks corroding and leaking their deadly content. NAS, which set stricter standards than the NRC, calls the exercise absurd. Henry Pollack, a geophysics professor at the University of Michigan, told representatives at secret meetings with the NRC and EPA, "Unanswered questions should not lead to policy paralysis." In other words, dump now and deal with surprises later. Leonard Konikow, a hydrogeologist with the U.S. Geological Survey said, "You hope it is not a catastrophic surprise."

Yucca Mountain, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, is destined to become the most radioactive place on earth. Nuclear reactors that have been running for 30+ years and supply about 20% of the nation's electricity, are responsible for creating vast amounts of irradiated fuel rods that will be delivered to tunnels below the mountain. All parties agree that the 3 billion curies and 77,000 tons of radiation slated for burial at Yucca will contaminate the surroundings; the only issues are When? and How badly? Daniel Wilkins, assistant general manager of the Yucca Mt. program, estimates

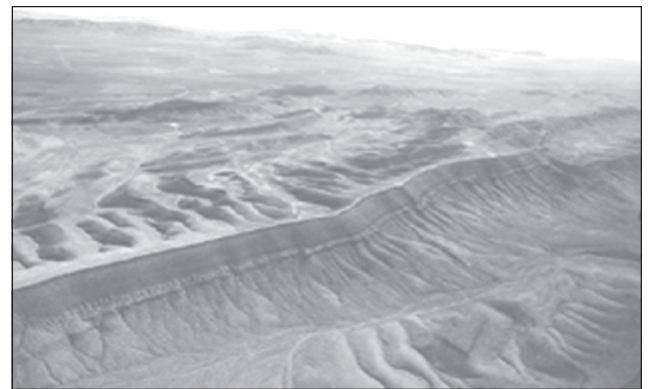
the first "package," containing between 21 and 44 fuel assemblies, will fail in about 10,000 years. "After that we're relying on the mountain to contain the waste," he said.

Nevada has hit a brick wall in dealing with the Advisory Committee on Nuclear Waste, a buffer panel which reports to the NRC and DOE on nuclear issues. The NRC and DOE have not answered Nevada's call to be present in meetings addressing concerns and problems with Yucca Mountain. State nuclear waste attorney Martin Malsch filed a Freedom of Information request to get documents generated at secret meetings. Nevada has filed nine lawsuits against the federal government. The state has won two, lost three, seen one "tableted" (Yucca's environmental impact statement), and the remaining three have yet to be settled.

In the face of official secrecy and widespread contamination at DOE and NRC sites, federal proponents are in need of public confidence in their Yucca plan. Sometimes it can be bought, and the DOE is trying to entice Nevada and its citizens by allotting \$3.5 million for the state and \$7 million to be divided among 10 affected counties if Yucca is licensed.

Congress allotted \$577 million of an \$880 million request in the White House budget for Yucca in 2005. Opponents consider any cut in congressional funding a victory as any delay is useful and budget cuts signify a lack of confidence in a given program. The Bush administration is asking for \$651 million for Yucca Mt. for 2006. The DOE plans to seek legislation that would grant it authority in fiscal 2007, without approval from Congress, to tap into the electric ratepayer fund set up to build the Yucca Mt. dump. But Nevada lawmakers have defeated similar efforts in the past and vow to do so again.

Perhaps the most absurd footnote of all regarding nuclear power is that the current Bush budget also adds \$56 million for a program to promote construction of new reactors — new nuclear waste generators that is.



An ariel view of Yucca Mountain located 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, NV

Irradiated Food Update

By Bonnie Urfer



The question of whether or not to serve irradiated food in school lunches has given school districts the opportunity to examine what healthy food means. The issue has driven decision-makers to completely different conclusions.

In Seattle, Washington, the school district unanimously passed a comprehensive bill designed to give students healthy beverage and food choices. The bill includes a ban on food high in sugar and fat and prohibits contracts with beverage companies. The school district aims to improve food quality by using fresh, locally grown, organic, unprocessed, non-genetically modified and non-irradiated food.

Other states, such as California, now under the leadership of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, have a long way to go in understanding what constitutes healthy policy for children rather than prioritizing political partisanship. The governor vetoed AB 1988, a bill that would have mandated parental notification before feeding children irradiated food. Enacting the law would not have cost the schools anything but would have ensured labeling of the controversial meats. On the bright side, six California school districts have banned irradiated food.

Last year, Texas, Minnesota, and Nebraska had enough requests to place an order for irradiated meat with the USDA, but the price was too high and there were enough safety concerns that the states didn't follow through with burger orders. Irradiated ground beef sells from 40 to 80 cents more per pound than ordinary burger at a time when school funding has been drastically cut by the federal government.

One of the day-care facilities that backed out of an irradiated meat deal is the Offutt Air Force Base Child Development Center in Nebraska. "We canceled the order because we didn't know enough about irradiated beef," said Senior Airman Vanessa Walsh, spokeswoman for the 55th Wing at Offutt Air Force Base. Bennington Public Schools in Nebraska ordered 820 pounds of irradiated beef because local school board members hoped the zapped meat could prevent food poisoning, but the price turned out to be too high.

Texas is the only state expected to feed irradiated beef to children this year.

A diet of irradiated food has not been proven safe to eat. Meat is zapped with the equivalent of 1 billion chest X-rays. There are no long-term, comprehensive research studies on the health effects of consuming irradiated food. Recent research has shown that one class of chemicals created by irradiation, alkylcyclobutanones, have been linked to the promotion of colon cancer in rats and genetic damage in human cells. Public Citizen called for a ban on food irradiation when this report surfaced.

The USDA, the Food and Drug Administration, the United Nation's World Health Organization and the American Medical Association have concluded that irradiated beef is safe, but on the basis of only four dated and flawed studies. Many cattle growers and meat processing facilities advocate irradiation which is said to kill most meat-borne pathogens. Cleaning up feed lots and slaughter systems would be cheaper.

"Temporary" Waste Site Permanently Threatens Goshute Reservation in Utah

By Bonnie Urfer

A battle against the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is brewing in Utah to match the battle against Yucca Mountain raging in Nevada.

Private Fuel Storage, Inc. (PFS), a consortium of eight utility companies, is eager to rid itself of deadly radioactive waste now stored in cooling pools and dry casks at reactor sites mainly in the Midwest. The consortium has been working for eight years to see its waste moved to the Goshute, Skull Valley Indian Reservation in Utah, 50 miles southwest of Salt Lake City. PFS wants the open-air storage area up and running by 2007.

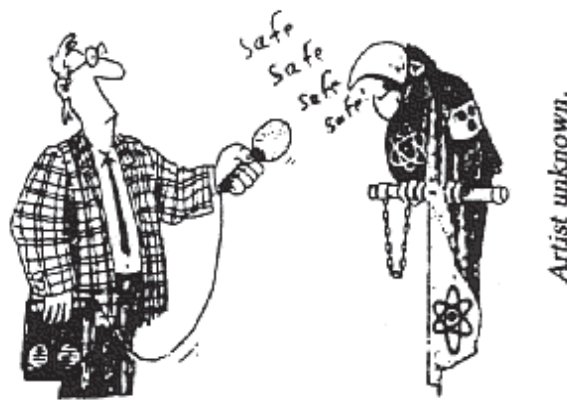
If approved, some 44,000 tons or about 4,000 casks of irradiated fuel rods would stand under the path of an Air Force jet training route. A military nerve gas storage facility is just to the east of the reservation, and a coal-fired power station is to the south. Seven thousand overflights of F-16s from the Hill Air Force Base and the Utah Test and Training Range (UTTR) buzz the Goshute Reservation every year. It's one of the busiest bombing ranges in the country. A stray missile struck a scientific research station on the reservation in the 1990s, and the Genesis satellite crashed into the UTTR last September.

On Feb. 24, a panel of administrative law judges, the Atomic Safety Licensing Board, concluded that concrete casks containing the irradiated fuel rods could withstand a direct hit from a crashing jet. That ruling opens the door for a decision by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to grant a license for the facility, though that will certainly begin more legal battles. The chance of an F-16 making a direct hit on a cask was said to be one-in-a-million.

On March 10, 2003, the ASLB blocked the dump proposal because of the dangers posed by the jet crash risks. The ASLB said at the time that it would reconsider its decision if PFS could convince the Air Force to reroute its flights, or the company could prove that the waste casks could withstand an F-16 crash.

Utah Governor Jon Huntsman, Jr. and Republican Senator Orrin Hatch have vowed to continue fighting the proposal. Commenting on the decision, Sen. Hatch uttered what could be the understatement of the nuclear age, "There seems to be a bias within the NRC in favor of the nuclear industry." A dump deal made in 2002 between George Bush II and Utah's two Republican senators, Hatch and Bob Bennett, now seems threatened. Bush signed a pledge — in exchange for votes from the senators in favor of dumping on Nevada — to block use of federal funds for building, maintaining or transporting nuclear waste to Goshute.

Challenges open to Utah include an appeal based on the 2-1 decision by the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board, a U.S. Supreme Court challenge, a Bureau of Indian Affairs suit, and pushing the Bureau of Land Management to refuse authorization of shipments to Skull Valley.



The placement of the high-level radioactive waste on Goshute land is being promoted as "temporary" — 40 years of temporary — in the hopes that Yucca Mountain would finally be licensed. But with Yucca Mountain set to accept a maximum of 63,000 metric tons of waste, existing radioactive garbage exceeds the dump's capacity. Utah is already being considered the *defacto* "spill-over" site. Critics who lambaste the "temporary" label for Goshute, point to the Department of Energy's Standard Contract for Disposal of Spent Nuclear Fuel. Its terms currently forbid any transfer of proposed Goshute waste to Yucca Mt., and require the DOE to accept only "uncanistered" waste fuel directly from reactor sites.

The Goshute tribe has about 120 members and few resources. The tiny tribe stands to gain \$3 billion if the storage deal is finalized.

The next step is for five NRC commissioners to review the ASLB's recommendation, decide on final approval — and for Utah and allied opponents to keep up the good fight.



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