

The Election's Over, What Happens Next?

Okay, the election's over now. Sen. John Kerry did *not* win the presidential election, which means that the Yucca Mountain repository project is *not* going to be stopped in its tracks and is, in fact, going forward to the next step: Licensing. At the end of November, the U.S. Department of Energy admitted that it would not have its license application submitted by the end of December 2004 as it had been promising all year. But Margaret Chu, director of the DOE's Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, which manages the repository program, says she does not expect the delay to be significant.

As I write this (in early December), Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham has submitted his resignation, but we do not yet know who will be nominated to take his place. In the last few administrations, during the second term, the Energy Secretary position has become a bit of a revolving door. Let's hope the next nominee sticks around for a little while. There's a lot happening in the nuclear world right now, and a strong, supportive Energy Secretary would mean a lot to many nuclear programs, not just Yucca Mountain.

With the defeat of Sen. Tom Daschle (S.D.) in the recent election, Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) has emerged as the new Senate Minority Leader. To the readers of these pages, Reid is most widely known as the Senate's most visible and verbal opponent of the Yucca Mountain project. We can expect that he will use this leadership position to further his goal of scuttling the project, but given the even greater Republican majority in the upper house of Congress in the next session, there is probably little of substance he can actually do in this area. Still, the Minority Leader can wield a lot of power in many areas, and we should not take his efforts lightly.

Sometime during the Congressional recess, President Bush will be making two recess appointments to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Com-

mission, including appointing Sen. Reid's science adviser, Gregory Jaczko, to a two-year term on the panel. As part of a compromise that led to this appointment (opposed by the nuclear industry because of his assumed bias against the Yucca Mountain project), Jaczko will be restricted from making any decisions on the repository license for the first year of his term. And Jaczko himself has pledged to be an unbiased Commissioner. Starting in 2006, we'll find out if that is true.

There are other waste issues getting Congressional attention these days. Long-time nuclear champion Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) is looking into the commercial low-level waste disposal dilemma. Assured access to disposal of all three grades of LLW (A, B, and C) is scheduled to end in just three and a half years, when the Barnwell facility closes to all but waste generators in Connecticut, New Jersey, and South Carolina. With 11 states served by the Richland, Wash., disposal facility, that leaves 36 states without anywhere to send B/C waste (the Envirocare of Utah site will accept all A waste these days).

Commercial nuclear power plants are taking steps to reduce B/C waste generation and to increase storage capacity, but smaller waste generators (research laboratories, hospitals, universities, etc.) may not have such capabilities. A solution to this problem is of paramount importance, but I'm not sure that we really want Congress to get involved again. After all, they "solved" the problem some 25 years ago (with a little tweaking a few years later) in the Low-Level Radioactive Waste Policy Act of 1980. (I had just gotten into the world of nuclear reporting in 1980; I remember that we genuinely all thought the problem had been taken care of. Ah, youth and naivete!) If another Congressional "solution" adds another 25 years' delay to the issue, are we really much better off?

The Private Fuel Storage effort



New Year, New Faces, Increasing Challenges

should receive a yea or nay from an Atomic Safety and Licensing Board in the December 2004/January 2005 time frame. If it gets a positive vote, then it can look forward to a Supreme Court challenge, because Utah is determined to use every tool available to prevent the construction of a spent fuel storage facility on Tribal reservation land in the state.

These are just some of the nuclear waste-related issues that will be addressed in this new year. More will surely emerge, and we will try to keep you informed in these pages throughout another wonderful year. Happy New Year!—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor*