

Too Many Choices?

Shortly after the November U.S. elections, which put the Democratic Party in control of both houses of Congress for the first time in a dozen years, I asked a colleague what would be the impact of having Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, the champion opponent of the U.S. Department of Energy's Yucca Mountain Project, serve as the Senate Majority Leader. My colleague replied that I was asking the wrong question.

The real threat to the Yucca Mountain Project, my colleague continued, was not a little high-level opposition at the congressional level. Rather, he said, it was the sudden increase in the number of alternatives to a high-level waste/spent fuel repository. He listed onsite spent fuel storage, centralized spent fuel storage, spent fuel reprocessing, and the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) project, among others. Are we going to store spent fuel for a while, or aren't we? Are we going to reprocess the backlog of spent fuel, or aren't we? Are we going to reprocess future spent fuel, or aren't we? It's these questions, and the uncertainties surrounding them, he concluded, that give those involved in the Yucca Mountain Project reason to fret.

I have spent a great deal of time since November thinking about that brief exchange. *Can* one have too many choices, and therefore be unable to make a sensible decision? I remember stories told in the Cold War days, by defectors from Eastern Europe and the old Soviet Union, that they found living in the West to be very stressful. Why? Too many choices. Moving from a world where they had few options or choices, whether we are talking about career moves or food selections, to a world of almost infinite choices was un-

bearably stressful. Need a box of cereal for breakfast? The typical Western grocery store offers a whole aisle of cereal choices: corn flakes, oatmeal, shredded wheat, Wheaties, Chex, Cheerios, plain cereal, sugar-coated cereal, chocolate-flavored cold cereal, maple-flavored hot cereal. How does one used to dealing with one or two choices of cereal make a selection from so many offerings?

So, does the prospect of reprocessing, for example, take away from the need for a geologic high-level waste repository? The most sensible answer would be that, no, reprocessing doesn't remove the need for the repository, although it may delay that need. But in the case of Yucca Mountain, which has suffered from so many delays already, does the prospect of even more delays sound the death knell? Is that the fear of the people who have already given up to a quarter of a century to the project?

Editorial writers can seem unbearably smug, sounding as if they have all the answers, pretending to be the voice of reason amidst the din of chaos. In truth, we editorial writers *don't* have all the answers—in some cases not even a single proposal. I'd like to think that just because there appear to be more options out there today than were available, say, five or ten years ago, we haven't lost sight of the Holy Grail. I want to believe that our quest for a final disposal facility for HLW and spent fuel—or for the reprocessing leftovers of that spent fuel—is still a major focus of our nuclear energy program.

I guess the only way we can tell for sure if the Energy Department is still serious about Yucca Mountain is to track the license application. Ward Sproat, director of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Manage-



Have We Lost Sight of Our Holy Grail?

ment, says he is "100 percent confident" that the license application will be submitted to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission by June 2008 (see "Headlines," this issue, page 6). You can be sure that the companies, utilities, scientists, engineers, workers, other interested parties in the nuclear industry, and, yes, editorial writers, will be watching closely as that date approaches.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor