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## Whither GNEP, Yucca Mountain, and Other Nuclear Programs

As I write this in late November, we have learned only a little about the direction that U.S. President-elect Barack Obama plans to take the country. We suspect that most of his energies and attention will be directed to the world's current dismal financial situation. But other issues, including health care, global warming, and energy policy, will be on the table as well, and at this point, we can only speculate on what actions will be taken on these issues. But I picked up a few tidbits of information at the recent American Nuclear Society Winter Meeting in Reno that might give our speculations a little credibility.

● **GNEP.** President Bush's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership program, launched a few years ago as a program to reduce the risk of nuclear proliferation while bringing the benefits of nuclear power to developing nations, and to develop fuel recycling facilities and advanced burner reactors (among other things), may be a program that does not survive the next few years. In 2007, the National Academy of Sciences reviewed the ambitious goals of the GNEP program, including its recycling and advanced reactor schemes, and urged the program to slow down. An Obama administration may elect to slow down the program to a crawl, or even slower. As noted in a session on the advanced fuel cycle at the ANS Meeting, already the House of Representatives, in its language on the fiscal 2009 budget, has directed the U.S. Department of Energy not to continue pursuing design and construction on any fuel cycle facilities, and while the program has been operating on a Continuing Resolution (and not a voted budget) since October, it is abiding by the House wording and focusing exclusively on research and development. Funding for the program has been cut in half. So GNEP is already slowing down, even before the new administration takes office in January. In addition, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has "unbundled" its licensing approach for a potential reprocessing plant from the GNEP program, noting that it has re-

ceived letters from the nuclear industry expressing interest in building a reprocessing plant, outside the concept of the GNEP program

On the other hand, it's been pointed out that one of the goals of the new Obama administration is to improve relations with other countries (many people feeling that the country's international prestige has been badly damaged by various actions of the Bush administration). GNEP has been enthusiastically endorsed by some 20 foreign nations, and they may want to see progress continue on this program. So the future of GNEP is murky at this point.

● **Yucca Mountain.** President-elect Obama campaigned on a policy of, shall we say, "non-endorsement" of the Yucca Mountain Project (the country's high-level waste and spent fuel repository project). Early in the campaign, he baldly stated that he felt that "there are still significant questions about whether nuclear waste can be safely stored there" and therefore he could not support the project. He did state, however, that the country should continue looking for a safe, long-term disposal solution based on "sound science."

Given the gains made in the Senate by the Democrats, Yucca Mountain foe Nevada Sen. Harry Reid (D) will still be Senate Majority Leader, and we can be certain that he will push the new administration hard to kill the project. Whether the president can simply kill a project developed under the law of the land is a good question. Previous experience suggests that perhaps he can. But lawmakers in those states with nuclear power plants and DOE nuclear facilities might not be supportive of such an action. Stay tuned.

As to what would happen should the Yucca Mountain project actually be killed, at the very least, there are questions as to the disposition of the Nuclear Waste Fund (Returned to customers? Absorbed by Congress? Rolled over to another project?) and the many utility lawsuits against the DOE for failure to take ownership of spent fuel as outlined in the DOE/utility contracts. Looming larger is



### *Gleanings from the ANS Winter Meeting in Reno and Other Sources*

what the new administration suggests should take the place of Yucca Mountain.

● **Water.** One speaker at the ANS Meeting mentioned water as the next big issue facing nuclear power plants, and noted that he would not be surprised if in 10–15 years, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission ordered those plants that rely on water cooling to backfit cooling towers into the plants. If that happens, would that mean another spate of commercial plant decommissionings, should utilities decide that the expense to comply is greater than the value of the plants? Admittedly, that's looking at a longer horizon than the next four years (President-elect Obama's first term of office), but it's still a good topic for speculation.—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor* ■