

Environmental Anniversaries

March 2009 was a month for environmental anniversaries—the big anniversaries, I mean, the ones that end in zero.

First, March 29 was the 30th anniversary of the accident at Three Mile Island-2 (TMI-2). For a time, it looked like this accident would be the silver bullet that killed the nuclear industry in the United States, but time has a way of easing people's memories. Time, and the fact that while the accident was a financial disaster for the operating utility, there were *no* environmental or health effects from the accident, either at the time or decades later. The sister plant, TMI-1, was able to go back online several years after the accident, and has been reliably churning out megawatts ever since. The nearby residents have found it to be a good neighbor, and despite some industry fears, there was little difficulty in renewing the plant's license. License renewal was granted early last year.

Next, March 24 marked the 20th anniversary of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Alaska's Prince William Sound. Nearly 11 million gallons of crude oil spilled out of the tanker after it hit a reef. The spill contaminated more than 1200 miles of shoreline and killed hundreds of thousands of marine birds and animals. (Interest-

ingly, as bad as the spill was, it is not even near the top of the list of the world's largest oil spills in terms of volume released.) While most people probably think that this incident is well behind us and the region now clean again, it's not true. Even today, oil remains in the area, and, according to a new report from the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council, the oil is decreasing at a rate of only 0–4 percent per year. At that rate, it will take decades and possibly centuries to disappear entirely, the report noted.

Still, I bet if you polled the average citizen about which accident, TMI-2 or the *Exxon Valdez*, was more environmentally damaging, he or she would probably point to TMI-2.

Finally, the third anniversary was celebrated (yes, celebrated, because this anniversary is a *good* one) on March 26—the 10th anniversary of the start of operations at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico, the world's best-known operating deep geological nuclear waste repository. WIPP is the destination for the nation's defense-related transuranic waste. Why mention WIPP in an editorial about environmental issues? Because one of the sticking points in environmental cleanup is where you send the waste after you've cleaned

things up. WIPP provides a destination for TRU waste that has enabled many former weapons sites, large and small, to clean house and shut down. The most notable of these is the Rocky Flats site, a former plutonium “pit” production plant that is now a wildlife preserve in the Rocky Mountain foothills. Thanks to WIPP, it was possible to send all of Rocky Flats' inventory of TRU waste offsite, enabling cleanup down to greenfield levels.

Bringing things full circle, it's not a great stretch to mention TMI and WIPP in the same editorial. The two do have a connection beyond the environmental one. The NuPac 125-B spent fuel rail cask, which was used to ship the damaged fuel from TMI to government storage in Idaho, is the grandparent, I guess you could call it, of the RH-TRU 72-B shipping cask being used today to transport remote-handled waste to WIPP.

Which brings us to *Radwaste Solutions* magazine. In a rare departure from normal editorial practices, this issue is devoted to a single topic—WIPP operations. Thanks to the tireless efforts of Roger Nelson, DOE chief scientist, and Susan Scott, communications manager, at the WIPP facility, this issue contains a series of articles on many aspects of WIPP operations, including inventory tracking, waste characterization, packaging, and transportation. Roger and Susan undertook this editorial task (in addition to all the other work the anniversary was piling on them) with unfailing patience and good humor, in the process discovering that the most necessary personality trait of a magazine editor is being a (gentle) nag. I cannot thank them enough for all their hard work, and I hope you enjoy the fruits of their labor. Happy reading!—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor ■

On Nobel Laureates

I have had several people comment on my last editorial (*Radwaste Solutions*, March/April 2009, p. 4), in which I stated that Energy Secretary Steven Chu is the first Nobel Laureate to serve as Secretary of Energy. They reminded me that Nobel Laureate Glenn Seaborg served as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission in the 1960s, at a time when that position encompassed the duties of both regulation and promotion of the nuclear industry, in essence making him the near-equivalent of energy secretary (at least as far as nuclear is concerned). So, while I am correct in saying that Chu is the first *actual* energy secretary to be a Nobel Laureate, these commenters are correct in stating that Seaborg was the first Nobel Laureate to do the job.