

The Salt Solution

I read the May/June [2009] issue paying tribute to WIPP on its 10th anniversary. What a success and what a compliment your May/June issue was for all of those who work so hard to make WIPP a success. There can be no doubt that the salt formations which house the military transuranic waste are a perfect medium for disposal of radioactive waste.

As a United States Senator, I spent 15 years working on nuclear energy issues, and how proud I am that WIPP is in my state, New Mexico. The time is ripe to look to the dormant salt beds for additional use in storing nuclear waste.

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Post-Yucca Mountain: The Next Steps

Your article, "Yucca Mountain: Dumped and Wasted?" in the July/August issue, was an excellent and unflinching recap of the history of the Yucca saga.

Our organization, the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC), has tracked the program ever since it was agreed that utilities (and their ratepayers) would pay via fees to the Nuclear Waste Fund (NWF) for the share of disposal costs related to the commercial spent fuel. I agree with David Jones that we were "Yucca, Yucca, Yucca" when that was the *only* option Congress permitted after 1987. We did not choose Yucca, but that was what Congress determined, however crudely. We supported the 2002 veto override because the waste acceptance was already overdue and we had confidence that the NRC had the appropriate skills and independence to conduct a safety review and render a license decision free of politics.

As for the blue-ribbon panel, it seems that Secretary Chu was optimistic when he told Congress he would have the recommendations of the commission by the "end of the year." We think he would like it to be a collection of technical experts, but some skeptics are concerned that there will be a number of political types as well. We asked to have State utility regulators be represented because the Nuclear Waste Fund needs major reform. I am concerned when all these proposals for interim storage and reprocessing are tossed about and proponents think they can

tap the \$23 billion supposedly available in the Fund. That money isn't really there: It is a series of IOUs for obligation for future Congresses to honor.

Given that all scenarios require a repository, we should start a (revised, more equitable) site search process for a new site (keeping the Yucca license process going) because unless we shift to reprocessing, we will need two repositories. We should learn from the (bad) lesson of Yucca and the (good) experience in Finland and Sweden with a more realistic, phased development approach.

What Finland, Sweden, and (it appears) Canada have that we do not is recognition that the problem needs a long-term solution. The notion of long-term among many politicians is until the next election. The most recent OCRWM [Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management] timeline for Yucca required funding through 2133! And, of course, we have the mind-boggling 10 000-year radiation standard that was found insufficient and now is set for a million years.

The reality seems to be that the spent fuel will remain in reactor storage sites for a while longer. We think the U.S. Department of Energy (or a private venture) should consolidate the 2800 metric tons from the nine single reactor sites that have been decommissioned. Since the costs for much of the current setup should fall on the federal government, the DOE should seek taxpayer (not NWF) dollars to pay for this since (I would expect) it is more cost efficient (and likely more secure) to pay for storage at a single, well-designed site than nine scattered sites.

Recognizing that the expected appropriations this year are a small fraction of fees collected (and that Senator Reid claims that the next budget will have no request for Yucca funding), NARUC sent a letter to the Secretary of Energy endorsing NEI's request that the NWF fees be suspended while the Administration figures out a new strategy (and sells it to the public and Congress). (See "Headlines," this issue, page 8.) Presently, the bulk of the fee revenue is absorbed in the federal fiscal shell game. There has been no reply as yet, but the preview line in the Statement of Administration Policy "SAP" for the FY 2010 Energy Appropriations bill contains this signal: "All of the fees collected in the Nuclear Waste Fund are essential to meet those (disposal) obligations." That, in my opinion, is an unsupportable statement since no one knows what the new disposal plan will be or how much it will cost.

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