

The Blue Ribbon Commission Has Its Say

At the end of July, the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future released its draft report, right on schedule. (The Executive Summary of the report can be found in this issue, on pages 46–55.)

The commission, formed by Energy Secretary Steven Chu after the Obama administration scuttled the Yucca Mountain project, was directed to look for a new direction for the nation's high-level radioactive waste and spent nuclear fuel disposal program. It spent several months taking testimony, visiting other countries' waste projects, and studying the topic. Then it spent another several months writing its 192-page draft report.

To summarize this report in a few points, the primary recommendations are as follows:

1. A new, consent-based approach to siting future nuclear waste management facilities.

2. A new organization dedicated solely to implementing the waste management program and empowered with the authority and resources to succeed.

3. Access to the funds nuclear utility ratepayers are providing for the purpose of nuclear waste management.

4. Prompt efforts to develop one or more geologic disposal facilities.

5. Prompt efforts to develop one or more consolidated interim storage facilities.

6. Support for continued U.S. innovation in nuclear energy technology and for workforce development.

7. Active U.S. leadership in international efforts to address safety, waste management, nonproliferation, and security concerns.

Well, pardon me for indulging in a little *lèse-majesté*, but really, couldn't the average reader of this magazine have come up with the same recommendations as the Blue Ribbon Commission, in 10 minutes and with no international visits or testimony? Consent-based approach? Yeah, we know that. New organization to run

the show? Ditto. Full access to the Nuclear Waste Fund, so a project doesn't have to depend on congressional appropriations? Yeah, we've talked about that. Developing one or more disposal facilities and one or more interim storage sites? Uh-huh. Innovation and leadership? Of course. I don't know whether that means the commission did its job well, or that this magazine's readers have been exposed to all the arguments and theories about possible new directions to be taken.

Actually, the commission probably *has* done a good job in this report, if reactions to it are anything to go by. Nuclear supporters were annoyed that the commission didn't just endorse the Yucca Mountain project (even though they were specifically chartered to look *beyond* Yucca Mountain to the future). Other supporters were annoyed with the opening statement: "America's nuclear waste management program is at an impasse." The program would not *be* at an impasse, these people noted, if the Obama administration had not shut it down.

Nuclear opponents, on the other hand, while rejoicing that the commission did not call for the startup of fuel reprocessing, were annoyed that the commissioners supported the concept of new nuclear power plants. They would have preferred that the commission recommend that all power reactors shut down immediately and that no new plants be built, so that no more spent fuel would be generated.

Any time you have both supporters and opponents of an issue annoyed with you, you have probably done a pretty fair job of capturing its essence. The commissioners came up with all the "right" answers, given their charter to avoid any discussion of Yucca Mountain. Reprocessing isn't in the cards for another couple of decades, if it ever will be, because of economic concerns. But we will definitely need "one or more" repositories and "one or more" interim storage sites, if only to get the spent fuel off the sites (and



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off the books) of the decommissioned plants in this country.

So why do I feel so let down? Well, I guess it's because I know that the half-life of the commission's report will be about, oh, half a millisecond. Like a lot of commissions before it and those that will follow, on many topics, its recommendations will depend on a functioning Congress and a supportive administration. And I just can't see those anywhere in the current government. Congress will continue to bicker and stonewall, the administration will thank the commissioners politely and go off to deal with the budget deficit (or *not* deal with the budget deficit), and life will go on as usual. And nuclear waste will continue to sit at the nation's reactor sites and defense sites for, oh, I don't want to say how long.—Nancy J. Zacha