

Sic Transit Gloria . . . and All That

I vaguely remember from my high school Latin classes that *sic transit gloria mundi* means something like: “thus goes the glory of the world.” I think it’s used in situations where civilization takes a mighty step backward.

I felt that civilization *had* taken a step backward in 2009 when the Obama administration decided to shut down the Yucca Mountain Project, just as it had finally gotten its act together and submitted a license application to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. And that’s how I felt at the end of 2012 when I read that Private Fuel Storage LLC had petitioned the NRC to withdraw its license for a spent fuel storage installation to be built in the Utah desert (see “Headlines,” this issue, page 12). Because PFS was still waiting for lease and other approvals from the U.S. Department of Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs (approvals that didn’t seem forthcoming, despite court orders), the consortium that makes up PFS simply could not afford to maintain the license indefinitely.

So it goes. The nuclear industry makes reasonable plans to dispose of its waste, and politics or indifference scuttles those plans every time. And then the nuclear industry is accused of having no way to dispose of its waste. One step forward, two steps back.

I could get really depressed about this, except that there is actually some good news on this topic as well. In late December, the waste disposal folks in Finland submitted a license application for a spent fuel encapsulation plant and final repository to that country’s Ministry of Employment and the Economy (see “Headlines,” this issue, page 12). If all goes well and people meet their deadlines,

Finland could have an operating spent fuel repository by around 2020. And France is supposed to announce a site for its proposed high-level waste repository this year (see “Managing Radwaste Around the World,” this issue, page 64).

There is other good news, and it’s on this side of the pond, amazingly enough. In the last issue (November-December 2012), I discussed the fact that New Mexico is actively pursuing a spent fuel storage facility, and had contracted with Areva to plan and promote a dry spent fuel storage facility for the state. The proposed facility would have a capacity of 70 000 metric tons of uranium.

Other states also appear to be willing to at least *think* about hosting a spent fuel storage installation or perhaps a spent fuel recycling plant. In mid-December, Areva met with an advisory panel in the state of South Carolina, which had expressed interest in hosting a regional facility for storing spent fuel. The state already hosts a major defense installation, the Savannah River Site, as well as a low-level waste disposal facility, at Barnwell, for the Atlantic Compact states, and also has several nuclear power plants, so South Carolina, like New Mexico, knows that nuclear facilities bring in well-paying jobs that benefit local communities.

And this administration appears to be interested in moving forward with spent fuel storage. A new report from the DOE states that a “pilot” storage facility could be available by 2021 (see “Headlines,” this issue, page 14).

Of course, Congress will eventually have to get involved. These days, while Congress broods about the debt ceiling, possible deep cuts in defense spending (the “budget sequester”),



*Yucca Gone,
PFS Gone,
Square One
Here to Stay?*

and gun control, it doesn’t appear that there will be much time spent on nuclear issues any time soon. Later, however, perhaps during those crazy, lazy, hazy days of summer, we might see Congress get beyond bickering about Yucca Mountain and do some serious work on solving this nation’s nuclear waste disposal dilemma. But if they don’t, I guess we’ll still be sitting here, right on square one, while the rest of the world moves swiftly past us.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor