

Decision Time on Yucca Mountain

Congress has set February 28, 2002, as the deadline for recommending Yucca Mountain as the nation's high-level radioactive waste repository. The deadline was set in the congressional budget document for Fiscal 2002. By that date, the U.S. Department of Energy must complete its environmental impact study and deliver a site recommendation on whether the mountain, located some 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, Nev., is suitable for use as a final disposition site for the nation's spent nuclear fuel and defense HLW.

In the budget, Congress approved \$375 million for the Yucca Mountain Project. This represents a compromise between the original House and Senate bills. The House had approved \$443 million (of the \$445 million originally requested by the Bush Administration), but the Senate cut program funding to \$275 million (a result of efforts by Nevada Sen. Harry Reid, a project foe, to slow the program). In subsequent Senate action, a "sense of the Senate" resolution was passed that included language stating that funding should be raised to a level closer to the House appropriation.

Congress also noted "that certain scientific and engineering work is directly related to the Site Recommendation and to resolving the technical concerns of the [U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission] and the Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board, and that such work should not automatically terminate upon submission of the Site Recommendation." The NRC is studying the speed of groundwater flow through the mountain and the amount of water contained at the repository site 1000 feet below the mountain surface; the agency also has questions about the possibility of volcanic activity.

These studies are expected to continue if the site is recommended, Congress noted, but are expected to be "terminated promptly" if the site recommendation is negative.

- The NRC has completed its regulatory basis for the Yucca Mountain decision. In an October 19 letter to the DOE's Lake Barrett, acting head of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, the commission said it concurred on the DOE's draft final revision

to the site suitability guidelines, which will be included in 10 CFR Part 963 of the DOE's regulations.

The guidelines, which include the criteria and methodology for evaluating Yucca Mountain's suitability as an HLW repository, are based on the NRC's final repository licensing criteria, 10CFR63, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's final radiation protection standard.

The DOE issued the final site suitability guidelines in mid-November.

- Some national heavy hitters have been recruited to encourage a timely, favorable suitability decision on the Yucca Mountain project. The bipartisan initiative, sponsored by the Alliance for Energy and Economic Growth, will be led by former New Hampshire Governor and White House Chief of Staff John Sununu and former Congresswoman and Vice Presidential Nominee Geraldine Ferraro. The initiative will involve urging lawmakers, Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, and President Bush to officially select Yucca Mountain as a permanent site and to begin work on an underground storage facility.

Speaking at a November 15 press conference announcing the initiative, Sununu noted that "in the next 60 to 90 days, the secretary of energy and the president have a unique opportunity to take a critical step forward to meet our generation's responsibility for the stewardship of used nuclear fuel and defense waste."

For her part, Ferraro said that the terrorist events of September 11 make her decision to co-chair the initiative "very clear-cut." "The Bush Administration has an easy decision with regard to Yucca Mountain," she said. "An abundance of science, a 20-year contract with the taxpayer and electrical utility ratepayer, energy and national security—and issues raised in the glare of September 11—

make both the suitability of Yucca Mountain and the need for it overwhelming."

The Alliance, co-chaired by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, is a broad-based coalition of more than 1200 small and large businesses, labor unions, and energy suppliers. It has also been active in urging Congress to pass a comprehensive energy plan.

More information on the Alliance can be found at www.yourenergyfuture.com. ■

It's About Time . . .

What a difference a few zeroes make.

In the article "Analog and Dialogs: Integrating Natural Analog Studies into a National Confidence-Building Program," *Radwaste Solutions*, November/December 2001, Page 24, we described a "200-billion-year-old core made by nature." Well, as one sharp-eyed reader noted, the whole universe is only (only!) about 15–20 billion years old, making a 200-billion-year-old core pretty darned near impossible.

Obviously, we should have said a "2-billion-year old core."

Radwaste Solutions regrets the error. We really do know better.