

Why High-Level Waste Could Be Good for Nevada

After all the buildup, it seemed almost anticlimactic. The Senate never really held an official, press-the-button vote on Yucca Mountain. What they did do was hold a vote on a related procedural issue, and when that won by a 60–39 vote, it became obvious that there were more than enough votes to override Nevada's veto of the Administration's selection of Yucca Mountain to be the nation's high-level waste repository. The final vote was merely a voice vote, and the "Ayes" had it. Now the folks at the U.S. Department of Energy's Yucca Mountain Project move into the next phase of development: preparing the licensing application, which is due by the end of 2004.

Is Nevada sitting in the shade now, licking its wounds? Hardly. As Dick Telfer says in his article, "What's Next for Yucca Mountain" (p. 40), opposition to the project in *some* parts of Nevada is never-ending. (In other parts of the state, particularly those communities close to the Project, there is evidence of strong support, Telfer notes.) Nevada plans more lawsuits, more protests, more scare tactics about transport. One reason given for this opposition is the fact that Nevada fears that the Project will result in a measurable falloff in the state's valuable tourist income.

But, hey, Nevada, it doesn't have to be that way. Look around you. You could be the host of one of the biggest tourist "hot spots" (no pun intended) the country has ever seen. Why do I say this? Because I just finished reading an article from a recent *Los Angeles Times* about a just-opened tourist attraction in Weldon Spring, Missouri: the old St. Louis-area uranium purification plant. According to the article, visitors can "hike up the nuclear dump or check out the Geiger counters in a new museum,

set up in a building that was once used to check uranium workers for contamination. A six-mile bike trail on the property will open soon, winding past the massive waste containment cell and along an old limestone quarry that just a decade ago was packed with radioactive rubble, TNT residue and crumpled metal drums oozing chemicals." Sounds almost idyllic.

The article continues: "At a time of fierce debate about the proposed nuclear repository at Nevada's Yucca Mountain, proponents say that giving public tours of containment cells may offer reassurance that radioactivity can be controlled. In an age when the governor of South Carolina threatens to lie down in the road to block plutonium shipments, bringing Boy Scout troops to explore a nuclear dump may send a comforting signal that the waste can be managed."

But in addition to the "feel-good" reasons for making a former cleanup site a tourist attraction, there's a more serious reason the U.S. Department of Energy wants to keep the site in the public eye: long-term stewardship. "One of the great fears all of us have is that people will forget," the article quotes a member of a National Academy of Sciences panel on managing radioactive sites. The policy at Weldon Spring represents a novel approach for keeping knowledge alive, utilizing oral tradition—the ancient way of passing knowledge from one generation to the next—to supplement the more modern use of written records, permanent warning signs, Internet postings, etc.

So, if the current generation enjoys the biking trail, future generations might also (assuming, of course, that there are bikes in the future). And if those generations remember that the site is a containment cell for radioac-



Six Flags Over Yucca Mountain?

tive waste as well as an attractive nature trail, then there is less likelihood that at some point in the future, a developer will eye the ground and wonder why no one has thought to build a few hundred condos on the site.

Will it work? "I don't know if it's the right answer. This is definitely unplowed territory," the article quotes an expert in long-term stewardship. Still, it's an intriguing idea, and one that Nevada might consider instead of all those lawsuits.—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor*