

## So much promise . . . so little progress

Remember those heady days of the early 1980s? For a time, it seemed that the United States was well on its way to being the first nation to deal responsibly with its radioactive waste.

For example, there was the Low Level Waste Policy Act of 1980, which "solved" the nation's LLW disposal problem by decreeing that individual states are responsible for the LLW generated within their borders, and set in place a mechanism by which states could bond together in "compacts" to dispose of this waste on a regional basis. Congress even had the foresight to set up deadlines and incentives and disincentives for progress or lack thereof. The situation was under control.

And remember the High-Level Waste Policy Act of 1982? This milestone legislation set in place the mechanism by which the federal government would deal with the nation's commercial spent fuel as well as the HLW resulting from the country's weapons program. The legislation was particularly evenhanded because it decreed an original repository, probably to be set in the western United States, and a second repository, most likely to be set in the eastern United States. Again, milestones were set in place, and progress was certain.

Well, milestones and incentives or not, things didn't progress quite as quickly as the legislators had hoped. No problem. In the mid-1980s, Congress was forced to modify the Low-Level Waste Act to extend the deadlines. And the U.S. Department of Energy, the agency implementing the HLW program, announced deadline slips and program truncation later in the decade. Regardless of these setbacks, the outlook remained positive. If a space alien had landed

in the United States in the mid-80s, he or she would have been pretty sure that this country had the nuclear waste situation well in hand.

If that same space alien dropped by today, however, he or she would probably take one look at the current situation and turn around and leave in disgust, never to return. (Thus also putting a stop to all those "alien-abduction" stories as well.)

Low-level waste? No working compact has opened a new site, even after 20 years. One compact has an operating site—a site that was already in existence before the law went into effect. Another state with a site operating before the legislation (and still open to all generators except those from one state) may soon join a compact (having already joined and later abandoned a different compact) and limit its site to that compact. And lawsuits, sanctions, and missed opportunities abound in other compacts. Those "responsible" states have shown little leadership and precious little responsibility.

High-level waste? Well, there we have some progress. An environmental impact statement has been issued on a possible disposal site being characterized, but regulatory agencies are squabbling over cleanup levels and standards. And the agency responsible for accepting waste has missed a "take-ownership" deadline and is faced with lawsuits from the nation's utilities.

In the wake of this official inaction, some private-sector initiatives are moving forward. In the short-term, the private sector may be the nation's savior in this area. Which says a lot about the private sector in this country, but says even more about the federal and state governments' dedication (or lack



thereof) to solving a national problem.

- On a more positive note, we are pleased again this year to publish the best oral papers from last year's Waste Management conference. In this issue, we present the best oral paper, "Radiation Exposure: Overcoming Vested Interests That Block Good Science," by Stanley Logan (page 50) and the honorable mention oral paper, "Cutting the Gordian Knot that Binds WIPP: Sampling and Analysis To Validate Acceptable Knowledge on LANL Transuranic, Heterogeneous, Debris Waste," by Stanley T. Kosiewicz, Daniel I. Michael, Paul K. Black, Lawrence A. Souza, and Ines R. Triay (page 55).

Waste Management '99 also awarded honors to two poster papers, not published in this issue. The best poster paper is "Processing of Pantex Plant Wet Waste for Disposal at the Nevada Test Site," by Kenneth Guay, Chris Reno, Matthew Cage, Ellen Gray, and Pam Davis. The honorable mention poster paper is "The Oak Ridge Broad Spectrum Contracts for Treatment of Mixed Low Level Waste," by Charles H. Estes, Kenneth D. Simpson, and Fred H. Miller. Congratulations to all these authors.—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor*