

A private sector option for waste disposal can change the dynamics of the LLW situation.

Let the Private Sector Help

By Charles Judd

No one who works in the low-level radioactive waste industry in the United States needs to be told that we have a problem. Despite legislation passed some 20 years ago to put in place an equitable “compact system” solution to the problem of disposal of the nation’s LLW, no compact-based disposal sites have opened, nor does it appear that any such site will open any time soon. At the time the legislation was passed, there were three LLW disposal sites operating in the U.S. Today, two compacts, the Northwest and the Rocky Mountain, have access to a compact disposal site, but that facility was operating before the compact system went into place. Another site, the Beatty, Nev., site, closed down shortly after the legislation was passed. The third site, that at Barnwell, S.C., became the site for the Southeast Compact, and eventually closed to LLW generators outside that compact. But after little progress was made in siting a second facility in North Carolina, South Carolina



pulled out of the Southeast Compact and reopened the Barnwell site to all generators except those from the state of North Carolina. Now, however, South Carolina has proposed to join with Connecticut and New Jersey to form a new compact, the Atlantic Compact, and may restrict access to Barnwell once more.

So where does that leave us today? It leaves LLW generators with new uncertainty about where they can send their waste. If Barnwell does close to generators outside its new compact, as the South Carolina governor has said it will, nuclear utilities, decommissioning plants, waste brokers, hospitals, universities, research facilities, and other industries located outside of the Northwest and Rocky Mountain compacts will have no place to send much of their low-level waste. (I say “much” of their waste, because there is one facility open to generators of Class A waste—the least radioactive of the classes of LLW. That facility is operated by my company, Envirocare of Utah Inc. The Envirocare site, in Tooele County, Utah, has been operating as a facility for the disposal of Class A waste for about a decade.)

Given this background, it's obvious that people have concerns about the progress—or lack thereof—in this country's LLW disposal situation. Despite this lack of progress, however, I still think that the compact process is doing some beneficial things for this country. I think that the idea of trying to equalize the amount of waste that goes to certain places has been a good idea. I think the idea of states working together to solve a problem is a good one. The compact system is not something I think we should just give up on and do away with. But I do believe that we cannot stay on the same course we've been on. There must be some adjustments to the system. The big question, of course, is what those adjustments might be.

Obviously, in our position, we think the private sector has a lot to offer. The Envirocare facility began as a square-mile site designated in 1984 for the disposal of uranium mill tailings from the Vitro Chemical Co. Approximately 2.5 million cubic yards of mill tailings were removed from Salt Lake City and railed to the site for disposal. The completed Vitro project used only 100 acres of the site, however, so in 1988 Envirocare purchased the remaining 540 acres and began operating a commercial radioactive waste disposal facility.

Envirocare has now applied to the state of Utah for a license to dispose of Class B and C wastes. The state has already conducted its review and has initially approved the siting criteria. That means that they feel that our site is a good location for this type of facility. Once that approval has been out for public comment, then the state will begin work on the actual application itself, doing the technical review. We are hopeful that this review can be completed in six to eight months, so that we can take our application before the state legislature and governor in the January/February 2001 time frame.

True, the Envirocare facility is not a compact site, but we have always felt that it is important to work with the compacts. When we first began operations in the waste disposal field, we met with the Northwest Compact to coordinate with them to make sure that the compact system and Envirocare could work together, not against each other. We will continue to do that as we work toward obtaining our new Class B and C license amendments.

A private-sector option for waste disposal can change the dynamics of the LLW situation. When no site is available, the debates can become exceedingly emotional. If a disposal option is available, however, it removes many emotional aspects of the issue. States and compacts can discuss options that are best for both the generators and the states. Compacts can continue with the siting and licensing work on a compact site, if they so choose. Or, they can contract with a private-sector site for waste disposal services. They have a choice, and they can gain some time to do the job right, without the concern that waste is sitting in places that it shouldn't be just because no site is available.

I think Envirocare will be successful in its quest for a Class B and C disposal license. We are not

Despite the lack of progress, I still think that the compact process is doing some beneficial things for this country.

spending anyone else's money; we're spending our own. And that's another thing that private industry offers. We are very careful and cautious about what we are doing, and we won't move forward if we don't think we can be successful.

Is there is room for other private-sector initiatives as well? Of course there is. However, I think one of the early problems with the compact system was that there were too many compacts and therefore too many potential sites. There just isn't enough waste to support all these sites. So while it's good to have more options, we have to be careful, because with the volumes being produced now, it's hard to keep a reasonable rate and still keep a facility functioning properly.

With an expanded Envirocare facility, or perhaps another private-sector option, available in a few years, the nation's states and compacts can take a breather and study just how they want to proceed with their LLW management plans. Working together, compacts and the private sector can solve the nation's LLW disposal problems. ■

Charles Judd is president of Envirocare of Utah Inc.

If a private-sector disposal option is available, it removes many emotional aspects of the LLW issue.