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Isn't It Ironic?

Back in the early 1990s, when the American Nuclear Society launched what was then known as *Radwaste Magazine,* things were looking pretty good for the waste cleanup and decontamination and decommissioning sectors of the nuclear industry. In fact, those areas of the industry were seen as about the only ones with any growth potential at all. The nuclear power industry was visibly suffering, and a few early plant shutdowns (Trojan, Maine Yankee) were seen as harbingers of the early demise of the whole industry. The smart money was on waste and D&D, the Cinderellas of the nuclear field.

Fast forward to 2008. Today, we see the nuclear power industry on the edge of a great resurgence. Five new applications for nuclear power plants were submitted to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission in 2007, and more than a dozen more are expected in the next year or so. There may even be a new plant order in the next couple of years—harder evidence of a nuclear renaissance.

And during this U.S. election year, we are hearing support for nuclear power from both sides of the political spectrum. Democrats (yes, Democrats) are supporting nuclear because it produces no greenhouse gases, the primary culprits behind climate change. Republicans, on the other hand, support nuclear power because of its potential role in leading the country toward energy independence. Regardless of the reasons behind the support, it's nice to have it, for a change.

In a nice ironic twist, however, nuclear waste has now been reduced to the ugly stepsister role. Absent some sort of last-minute white knight rescue, this year will see the closure of the nation's only Class B and C low-level waste disposal site that's open to all waste generators. After June 30, B/C waste generators in 36 states must begin to store their wastes, because they will have nowhere to send them. These generators include power plants, universities, hospitals, research entities, pharmaceutical firms, and general industrial companies.

D&D has been injured by its own success. Those few plants that ended up shutting down early have now been cleaned up. Even the smaller test plants (Saxton, Pathfinder) that had sat for years in SAFSTOR condition have completed decommissioning. There are very few commercial projects left to do. The U.S. Department of Energy's Fernald and Rocky Flats sites are now green fields. Yes, there is plenty of decommissioning work remaining on the DOE's larger sites (Oak Ridge, Savannah River, Hanford), but a lot of the sexy stuff is finished. In many areas of D&D, the only remaining task is to write up the lessons learned.

In the area of high-level waste, the proposed Yucca Mountain HLW/spent fuel repository project is expected to submit its license application to the NRC this year. But Congress, thanks to the efforts of Yucca opponent Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), the Senate majority leader, cut more than $100 million from the fiscal 2008 appropriation for the project, putting the license application at risk and ensuring that continuing research and study at the project is hampered, if not completely stymied.

The Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's trade group, is so excited about the nuclear power renaissance that it's willing to put the waste issues aside for now. At the ANS/ENS International Meeting last November in Washington, D.C., former New Hampshire Gov. John Sununu challenged the industry on its position on Yucca Mountain. Do you need it? Can you live without it? Are you now supporting interim storage? You're confusing your friends, he said. If *you* don't know what your policy is, are you expecting others to tell you? In response, the NEI's Richard Myers said that the industry's position on Yucca Mountain is "fluid, by necessity." Besides, he added, it's a time of change in positions on the back end of the fuel cycle, so it doesn't make sense to push for a final solution right now. (For more on this exchange, see "Groundwater Contamination . . . and Other Issues," this issue, page 66.)

Forward to the Past

To cap off the ironies, we need to look back to the early days of the nuclear industry. Isn't this how we started? In the 1950s and 1960s, didn't we forge ahead with nuclear power plants, visibly postponing the day of reckoning on the waste? Are we making the same judgments today? Instead of back to the future, are we heading forward to the past?

Just asking.—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor* ■