

Yes, We Are Making Progress

This past September, I attended the 5th Annual RadWaste Summit, which is sponsored by Exchange Monitor Publications and Forums. This conference, which is always held in Las Vegas immediately after Labor Day, is the perfect setting for monitoring the state of the low-level waste disposal situation. It is a much smaller meeting than the massive Waste Management conference held each February in Phoenix, and has no concurrent sessions. This gives attendees a chance to see roughly the same presenters each year giving updates and new perspectives on the same programs and issues.

To prepare for this editorial, I reread the four meeting reports I have written about the past RadWaste Summits. (See "Covering All the Bases at the Low-Level Summit," *RS*, November/December 2007, p. 13; "Same Issues, New Solutions at This Year's Radwaste Summit," *RS*, November/December 2008, p. 16; "DU, Part 61, and a Host of Other Issues," *RS*, November/December 2009, p. 16; and "The Changing Paradigm for LLW Management," *RS*, January-April 2010, p. 91.) I then compared the issues discussed in those reports with the situation today. My conclusion: Progress is being made in the world of low-level waste management and disposal. Issues arise, take center stage, then get resolved or dwindle in importance. A glance at any given time might reveal only problems, but looking at a five-year period shows problems solved, issues resolved, and work being accomplished.

At the first Summit, in 2007, U.S. waste generators had only 10 more months of access to a Class B/C waste disposal facility—the Barnwell LLW disposal site would be closing to all out-of-Atlantic-Compact waste generators at the end of June 2008. The DOE was facing the late 2010 closure of the mixed-waste cell at the

Nevada Test Site (NTS). The concept of waste mixing, or "aggregation," was being tentatively explored.

The 2008 Summit featured U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Commissioner Greg Jaczko as the keynote speaker. With Barnwell having closed to most waste generators, Jaczko acknowledged that the LLW disposal situation was "challenging." There was a glimmer of hope on the horizon for waste generators because the Waste Control Specialists (WCS) site in Texas had just been granted a draft license. And with the first wave of nuclear power plant decommissioning just about wrapped up, many speakers noted that the U.S. still had "time to come up with solutions" for LLW disposal. Other speakers suggested that the U.S. Department of Energy's LLW disposal sites—or even the greater-than-Class-C (GTCC) disposal site, wherever and whenever it might be built—should be opened up for commercial B/C waste. The state of Utah was wary of the concept of waste blending, if it meant that higher activity waste would be coming to the Clive LLW disposal site. And meeting attendees were somewhat divided on whether depleted uranium was a liability or an asset.

By the 2009 Summit, a new administration had been in office for several months, the Yucca Mountain project appeared to be shutting down, and the NRC was busy working on risk-informing the regulations in Part 61, which covers LLW disposal. Billions in stimulus money were going to be thrown at DOE cleanup projects. And waste generators had pretty much gotten used to "life without Barnwell."

At the 2010 Summit, the DOE reported that it had made great progress on developing a new cell for mixed waste at the NTS (now renamed the Nevada National Security Site, or NNSS), that the department was up-



LLW Summit, Same Time, Each Year

dating its Order 435.1 (to give it more disposal alternatives), and that it had reduced its list of "problematic" waste streams. Risk-informing Part 61 generated more discussion, and the environmental impact statement (EIS) for GTCC disposal was due to be released within months. Waste blending still generated lively discussions and comments.

Which brings us to the present. At this year's Summit, which featured NRC Commissioner William Magwood as the keynote speaker, Magwood pointed out the unusually disastrous year the nuclear industry has been having, what with the Japanese earthquake and tsunami and the accident at Fukushima Daiichi; an earthquake along the U.S. East Coast; flooding from Hurricane Irene; and

Continued on page 6

Comments on this issue ▼

the Fort Calhoun plant becoming “an island” in the wake of river flooding in the plains states. In the face of these disasters, Magwood said, it was hard to call the LLW disposal situation a crisis, and so he called it a “responsibility.”

Disasters aside, the commercial industry representatives were cautiously optimistic that the WCS facility in Texas (due for a grand opening this November) would “solve” the problem commercial generators face of having no disposal facility for B/C waste. The NRC is still working on Part 61 (and will be for several more years). The DOE is looking at “several alternatives” for much of the waste in the problematic waste streams. The draft EIS for GTCC is now available, stating that “dry sites” will be suitable (and a representative

from the state of New Mexico all but offered the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or some new facility to be built in its vicinity, as a facility for GTCC disposal), and the draft of the revised DOE Order 435.1 is due to be released within a few months.

So, in the space of five years, we can see that issues arise, generate a lot of discussion, and then, bit by bit, are resolved or at least addressed. The WCS site in Texas may or may not solve the B/C disposal problem in the United States, but at least now there’s hope of having a disposal option. The DOE still has problematic waste streams, and faces decreasing budgets ahead, but solutions for some of these streams have been found; at any rate, a new mixed-waste disposal cell at the NNSS has now been opened. GTCC may soon find a home. The need for

waste blending may go away if the WCS site is available for waste generators, and we are now pretty sure that depleted uranium is a liability, not an asset, so those issues are attracting less attention. The NRC is working on risk-informing Part 61, although we can’t expect any resolution on that issue for several more years.

Sometimes we are so close to an issue, it’s difficult to see the big picture, but stepping back gives us a chance to gain a wider perspective. My full meeting report of the 2011 Summit will appear in the January-April 2012 issue of *Radwaste Solutions*. In the meantime, we can take some comfort from the fact that yes, we are making progress in LLW management and disposal—baby steps, maybe, but steps forward all the same.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor

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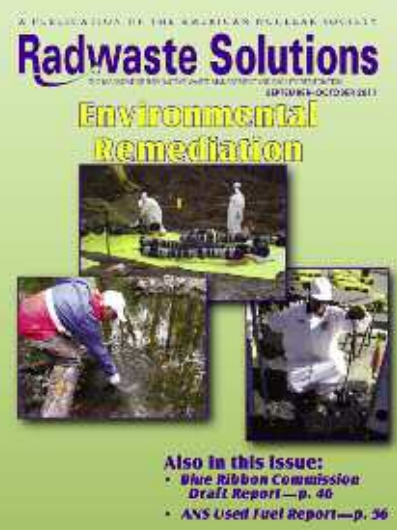
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