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A Tale of Two States

This editorial is a tale of two states, Utah and New Mexico. Both are Western states, each with one large city, several smaller communities, and lots of sparsely populated desert and mountain regions. Both were founded by religious groups—in the case of Utah, the Mormons, or, more formally, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), and in the case of New Mexico, the Catholic Church (Santa Fe, after all, means "holy faith"). These two states, while never touching—except in that area unique in the United States known as the "four corners," where you can stand in four states at once—would appear to have much in common. And they do.

For instance, both states are home to mining activity. Desert and mountain terrains hold lots of interesting minerals. And both states have been considered prime real estate for nuclear waste disposal—empty deserts, little rain, sparse population. Both appear perfect for nuclear waste disposal.

And both states do host nuclear waste disposal facilities. Utah has the EnergySolutions low-level waste disposal site west of Salt Lake City. New Mexico has the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, located in the southeastern sector of the state, near Carlsbad (which also hosts some rather famous caverns).

But there the similarities end. Utah has the LLW disposal site, and has gone to great lengths to make sure that no additional nuclear waste shall ever cross its borders. When Private Fuel Storage LLC (PFS), a consortium of eight nuclear utilities, tried to site an away-from-reactor dry spent fuel storage facility in the state (on Tribal land belonging to the Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians), the LDS church, state officials, the major newspapers, and just about everyone else with a particle of power all opposed the proposal. Because of that opposition, even though PFS has received a Nuclear Regulatory Commission license for the facility, it is doubtful that it will ever be built—at least, not any time soon.

New Mexico, on the other hand, appears to have embraced nuclear waste (figuratively, at least). Sure, back in the days before WIPP opened, the Santa Fe crowd strongly opposed having that facility in the state. But once WIPP opened, and WIPP trucks traveled through the state with no incidents (no small children dying because a WIPP truck happened to have passed by as they were playing outside, as many people were said to fear), and with the Carlsbad area enjoying the presence of some steady jobs at the WIPP site (Lea County supposedly has a 3–4 percent unemployment rate), people began to realize that the nuclear waste they were disposing of was causing them no problems at all. In fact, it has provided jobs, an increased tax base, and income.

This realization has led to several other nuclear-based facilities being sited in the WIPP area. The Urenco USA facility is in operation while still being expanded in nearby Eunice. International Isotopes Inc. has just received a license to build a uranium deconversion and fluorine extraction facility in Lea County. And while this probably doesn't count, the Texas Compact's low-level waste disposal facility in Andrews County, Tex., is located right on the Texas–New Mexico border near all these other facilities.

Now the entrepreneurial folks in southeastern New Mexico have added another venture to the list. The Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance (ENEA) has just contracted with Areva to plan and promote a dry spent fuel storage facility for the state. The facility would have a capacity of 70 000 metric tons of uranium and reportedly would provide some 150 job opportunities. (See "Headlines," this issue, page 10.) The project is being funded by contributions from Eddy and Lea counties and the towns of Carlsbad and Hobbs.

As noted in an article on page 14 in this issue, "Centralized Interim Storage—Past, Present, and Future," building a centralized dry storage is not cheap. The Electric Power Research Institute estimates capital costs at nearly $500 million and startup costs at around $67 million. That's before a single spent fuel canister arrives onsite. Yearly operational expenses would be around $100 million, EPRI estimates. But the ENEA officials seem to think this would be a good investment—good for New Mexico, good for the United States, and good for the utilities in the nuclear power industry, which would probably pay big bucks to have someone else storing and guarding their spent fuel for them.

So, two states, two similar geographies and histories, but two distinct attitudes toward certain entrepreneurial opportunities. Only time will tell which state got it right.—*Nancy J. Zacha, Editor* ■

Oh So Similar Yet Oh So Different!