

Comments on this issue ▼

We Happy Few . . .

The theme of the 2000 ANS/ENS International Conference, held November 12–16 in Washington, D.C., was “Nuclear Science and Technology: Supporting Sustainable Development Worldwide.” As speaker after speaker noted during the meeting’s kickoff plenary session, given the current evidence for global warming, given the current level of technological advancements, and absent any breakthrough energy resource inventions in the next several decades, sustainable development—the concept of supplying enough energy to fuel human existence, growth, and prosperity while doing no environmental harm—is going to be impossible to achieve without a rapid expansion of nuclear power generation around the world.

But, as John Parkyn, chairman and CEO of Private Fuel Storage, the utility consortium venture trying to build an offsite dry spent-fuel storage facility in the state of Utah, stated at a later session: “The global warming problem will not be solved at the vendor level [with new plants], but rather in this room. If we don’t store the fuel and solve the waste problem, there will be no new plants.”

This, of course, is nothing new. Plenary speakers kept repeating the same old mantra: “We have to solve the waste problem.” I’ve been attending these meetings for more than two decades, and I’ve been hearing this phrase from the beginning.

But hearing it this time started my brain working (some would say that is a dangerous thing, but I digress). Those who labor in the world of nuclear waste management really *do* hold the future of humanity in their hands. The stirring call to arms from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* comes to mind: “We few, we happy few . . .” (Act IV, Scene III).

Those laboring to decommission nuclear power plants are proving to the world that a utility can operate a nuclear electricity generating facility for a given number of years, shut it down, dismantle the buildings, ship the waste

away for disposal, and store (and eventually dispose of) the spent fuel, leaving behind a site probably cleaner than it was before the plant was built. The lakefront property around the Big Rock Point Restoration Project will certainly not languish on the market once the site is restored to greenfield conditions. Indeed, at this meeting we heard numbers like values of \$500 per foot for the lakefront land.

Those working on cleaning up the legacy of the Cold War and the defense programs that were spawned because of it are proving that a country can provide for the national defense, stop a defense program when the country is no longer threatened, and clean up after itself, developing technologies and implementing creative solutions along the way. Already, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, an underground repository for the disposal of transuranic waste, is up and running in the United States, the first such repository operating in the world.

Those involved with the spent-fuel storage issues and programs are inching closer to a solution, at least in the short term, in the form of onsite dry storage and temporary offsite storage sites. Progress on a long-term solution moves at a glacial pace, perhaps, but is moving nonetheless, despite court challenges, state intervention, protests, lawsuits, disinterested administrations, and other impediments.

Perhaps later generations will not “think themselves acurs’d” that they could not participate in the early days of nuclear waste cleanup, as Henry V proclaims about the battle on Saint Crispin’s Day, but certainly later generations will have reason to be grateful to the “happy few” who now labor long and mostly unsung to develop the solutions that will enable nuclear waste to be cleaned up, wrapped up, and disposed of forever, making the way for the renaissance of nuclear electricity generation, a sustainable energy resource that will power our planet in the future.—

Nancy J. Zacha, Editor ■



*Global Warming,
Sustainable
Development,
and Nuclear
Waste
Management*