



SNAKE RIVER ALLIANCE

IDAHO'S NUCLEAR WATCHDOG & CLEAN ENERGY ADVOCATE

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Nuclear Waste—Now What?

All nuclear waste is hazardous. But certain waste streams are particularly gnarly. Greater-than-Class-C waste is among the nastiest, and it might come here.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission divides “low-level” nuclear waste into categories. Class A low-level waste requires the fewest disposal constraints; Class B poses greater dangers and therefore needs stricter disposal guidelines. Class B waste includes the chopped off parts of the nuclear navy’s irradiated fuel elements, which are among the most radioactive waste disposed in Idaho. Class C is a step up on the continuum.

Greater-than-Class-C waste is over the top.

By law, the federal government, specifically the Department of Energy (DOE), is responsible for the disposal of Greater-than-Class-C (GTCC) waste. For decades it’s been accepted that GTCC waste is not suitable for near-surface disposal. In fact, NRC regulations require GTCC waste be disposed of in a deep geologic repository unless it approves an alternative method.

So here we go. Under the Energy Policy Act of 2005, the DOE must submit a report to Congress on GTCC disposal, and it has issued a draft environmental impact statement as part of the process. The draft EIS looks at how to dispose of 12,000 cubic meters (1,100 already in storage; 11,000 projected) containing *160 million curies*. Far and away the bulk of the radioactivity comes from future decommissioning of commercial nuclear reactors.

The DOE has chosen to look at four disposal scenarios: deep geologic disposal; intermediate depth borehole (30 to 40 meters below ground); “enhanced” near-surface trenches (5 to 10 meters deep); and above ground vaults. Deep disposal would happen at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico; the other disposal scenarios could happen at the Hanford Reservation, Washington; the Idaho National Laboratory (INL); the Los Alamos National Lab, New Mexico; the Nevada Test Site; or the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

Let’s set aside discussing WIPP for the moment. Of the remaining five sites, all are large and already controlled by the DOE. Four of the five are in the arid west. (There’s a surprise.) The DOE’s study does not even attempt to assert that these five sites are the best choices for GTCC disposal based on any objective criteria at all. Of all the arid sites, INL would have the *highest* long-term human health impacts because of exposure through radioactively contaminated groundwater.

Of the other choices, WIPP also presents particular challenges for the people of Idaho to consider. WIPP is the only deep geologic repository *on the planet*. It was opened with a promise to the people of New Mexico that it would be used *solely* for waste from nuclear weapons production. Commercial waste is specifically prohibited. (Sound familiar?) The federal government can't now tell New Mexicans: "You took the nose, now take the camel." To do so would show every other community asked to host a permanent repository in the future that they might well get more than they bargained for.

The Snake River Alliance has long advocated that nuclear waste be stored as safely as possible as close to its point of generation as possible. That means that, by and large, nuclear waste stays where it is in hardened on-site storage, and commercial reactors in the east can't willy-nilly send their waste to the west. The Idaho National Laboratory has some GTCC waste that was generated in Idaho, including metal that became highly radioactive because it was part of a reactor structure. For now, it would stay here in hardened on-site storage (HOSS). But if we break our promise on WIPP, it may well remain the only geologic repository of the planet. That would guarantee *all* the waste now in Idaho, no matter where it was generated, would stay right here.

Tell the DOE what *you* think

Submit written comments by Monday, June 27

Arnold Edelman, Document Manager, DOE GTCC EIS
Cloverleaf Building, EM-43
1000 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20585
or gtcceis@anl.gov or www.gtcceis.anl.gov

Contact the Snake River Alliance for updates and more information
bbrailsford@snakeriveralliance.org 208-233-7212 www.snakeriveralliance.org