

December 20, 2008

EDITORIAL

Where Does It All Go?

The Energy Department has recommended expanding the amount of nuclear waste that could be stored in an underground repository at Yucca Mountain in Nevada to avoid the need for a second dump. It is a sensible proposal that also is an urgent reminder of how little progress has been made in solving one of the most vexing problems of the nuclear age.

Tens of thousands of tons of spent fuel and military waste have been piling up at temporary storage sites around the country while the federal government has struggled, unsuccessfully, to find a long-term solution.

Expert groups have long recommended that the nuclear waste should be buried deep underground in a stable, leak-resistant geological formation that would keep it bottled up for many millennia. Yucca Mountain, the only site now under consideration, has run into so many technical problems and so much political opposition that its future is uncertain. The site is still awaiting licensing from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

In the 1980s when Congress ordered the Energy Department to look for places to bury long-lived radioactive wastes, it visualized two underground repositories — one in the West and one in the East — to spread the burden fairly. Congress eventually chose one site in Nevada, which lacked the political clout at the time to push it elsewhere.

The only concession to Nevada was that no more than 70,000 metric tons could be stored at Yucca Mountain until a second repository was in operation. The amount of spent reactor fuel and military waste now stored at production sites and waiting for permanent disposal is expected to reach that limit by 2010.

The Energy Department now has recommended that the statutory limit be eliminated so that consideration of a second repository can be deferred. Without specifying any particular capacity, the report notes that Yucca Mountain could physically accommodate at least three times the statutory limit.

It would make sense to expand Yucca Mountain rather than undertake the arduous and controversial process of evaluating sites in other states. The political tides are running against the Yucca Mountain site. During a primary debate in Las Vegas, Barack Obama pledged to Nevada voters that he would “end the notion of Yucca Mountain.” His choice for energy secretary, Steven Chu, is also unenthusiastic.

A currently powerful Nevada Congressional delegation, led by its United States senators — Democrat Harry Reid, the majority leader, and John Ensign, the fourth-ranking Republican — also is pushing to kill off the project.

Our hope is that opponents of the repository will wait for a verdict from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission

before prejudging the site as unacceptable. Nuclear waste is piling up and the country needs to find a safe place to store it.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
