

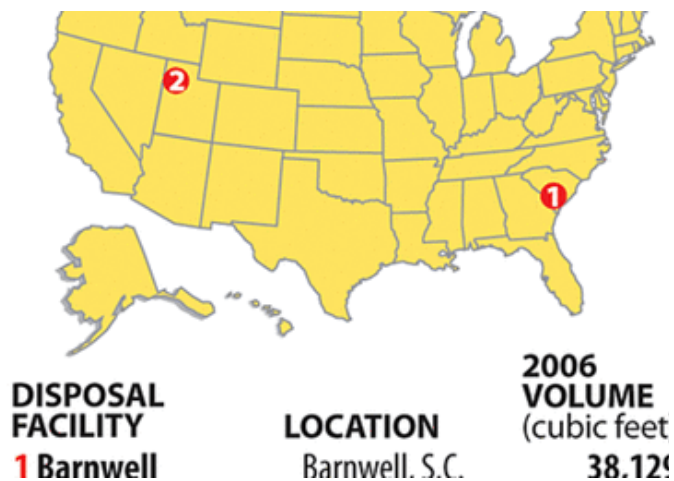
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Will U.S. become world's nuclear-waste dump?

Critics say a plan to import up to 20,000 tons of low-level waste from Italy, the biggest import ever, could lead to even larger flows.



SOURCE: US Department of Energy/Rich Clabaugh-STAFF

By Mark Clayton, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / February 28, 2008

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The federal government is weighing a Utah company's request to import large amounts of low-level radioactive waste from Italy – a step critics say could lead the United States to become a nuclear garbage dump for the world.

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If approved, the company would ship up to 20,000 tons of metal piping, sludge, wood, contaminated clothing, and other mildly radioactive material from Italian

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▶ Audio: Reporter Mark Clayton discusses a Utah company's plan to import nuclear waste from other countries.

nuclear-power plants to Tennessee, process most of it, then dispose of the remainder in Utah. It would be by far America's largest import of nuclear waste.

The proposal, which entered a 30-day public-comment period on Feb. 11, is gathering opposition from environmentalists, regulators, and congressmen. It would not only pave the way for more such imports, critics say, but also give nations less

incentive to take care of their own nuclear waste.

"If this massive quantity from Italy is accepted, it just blows the doors wide open for nuclear waste to come in from all over the world," says Tom Clements, Southeast nuclear campaign coordinator for Friends of the Earth, an environmental group in Washington. "The NRC [Nuclear Regulatory Commission] has an obligation to deal with the waste generated in this country first and not accept foreign waste that fills up existing sites."

Critics misrepresent how much material would be ultimately disposed of in Utah, counter officials of EnergySolutions, the Salt Lake City company proposing to import the Italian waste. Most material would be recycled or incinerated in Tennessee. Just 8 percent of the original volume would travel to Utah, the company wrote in a letter to the NRC.

"EnergySolutions does not believe the United States should be responsible for the world's nuclear waste," company spokesman Mark Walker writes in response to e-mailed questions from a reporter. But as reliance on nuclear power grows worldwide, "the US is in a leadership role to provide technical solutions."

Whether such imports will become a regular practice remains a question. The company "has no plans" to open its Utah disposal site "to wholesale disposal for the world's nuclear waste," Mr. Walker writes. But in a recent prospectus, the company envisions "specialized decommissioning and disposal services" for Europe and the United Kingdom.

Only 10 of 18 nations surveyed by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) last year have disposal options for low-level nuclear waste and none has options for all classes of such waste.

Critics say import regulations are weak because Congress never foresaw that the US would import large volumes of radioactive waste. "There is no indication in [legislative action or NRC regulatory action] that there was any intention that the United States would ever become a welcome repository of foreign-generated radioactive waste," Rep. Bart Gordon (D) of Tennessee, chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology wrote earlier this month in a letter to Dale Klein, NRC chairman.

While the US has long permitted low-level radioactive waste imports, most have been small compared with the EnergySolutions request. Of 24 such waste-import license applications over the years, NRC records show 13 granted, according to an analysis by the House committee. The EnergySolutions plan is 25 times bigger than the largest import from outside North America, that analysis shows.

EnergySolutions says its plan is not out of line with past licenses. The company cites a 2006 license to import 6,000 tons of waste from Canada – about one-third the size of its Italy request.

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