



## 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.

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Yet the Italy proposal would be "the first attempt by a US waste processing company to import large amounts of [low-level radioactive waste] as part of an agreement to decommission foreign nuclear reactors," Representative Gordon writes. If granted, "many other such license applications will follow" rather than forcing nations to deal with their own waste.

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That could be a problem, since the space available in US low-level waste sites would fill up in the long run if the US nuclear industry expands, as many expect.

"The uncertainties surrounding disposal costs and availability and other limitations in [low-level radioactive waste] management are taking on even greater significance as the United States embarks on developing new nuclear power plants, which would eventually create even more" low-level waste, the GAO reported last year.

At present, the US has 104 commercial nuclear power plants each generating on average about 12,000 cubic feet of low-level nuclear waste – about 15 million cubic feet annually, the GAO says. The US has three facilities that accept the least-toxic "Class A" radioactive waste.

But the site in Barnwell, S.C., is nearly full and in June will be closed to waste from all but three states. The site in Richland, Wash., is accepting only limited amounts. That leaves EnergySolutions' site at Clive, Utah, which took more than 99 percent of the nation's low-level waste in 2006. There appears to be "sufficient disposal capacity" for "Class A" waste, but "uncertain future access" for other categories, the GAO says.

Walker says the EnergySolutions facility has "at least 20 years of capacity" and that the Italian material represents less than 1 percent of the annual average amount disposed at the site.

While the NRC keeps an eye on disposal site capacity, Chairman Klein in a letter last month noted that the NRC's environmental and public-health review of the application to import Italian waste "is limited to ensuring that the import and transportation of the waste to the disposal facility is conducted safely" and that other regulatory limits for the facility "will not be exceeded."

Even so, the NRC has sought details about material to be imported and assurances that it will meet US standards for low-level waste disposal. EnergySolutions, in a December letter, revealed to NRC that three of the eight Italy sites from which it expects to get material "may be comparable" to US Superfund sites, akin to sites identified by the US Environmental Protection Agency as among America's most toxic waste sites.

In the end, though, it is largely up to states to decide whether such shipments make sense for them, the NRC spokesman says.

"Is there a place willing and able to accept the material – that's where we consult the states in question, Tennessee and Utah," says NRC spokesman David McIntyre. "If the states say 'no,' we wouldn't let it in."

So far, Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. has not put a halt to the EnergySolutions plan. Yet concern seems to be growing in Utah, including the state's three-man Radiation Control Board, whose members are appointed by the governor. At its December meeting, two members expressed unhappiness with the Italian waste import plan. A statement by the board reflecting opposition to it is expected, some observers say, although it is unclear what effect that might have.

Activists are also ramping up calls for public opposition.

"We see this as the camel's nose under the tent," says Vanessa Pierce, executive director of Healthy Environment Alliance of Utah, a coalition of environmental groups. "If we establish a precedent for importing very large quantities of foreign nuclear waste, we're going to make the US and Utah the dumping ground for the rest of the world."

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