

NUCLEAR WASTE

- A long time and contentious issue in Nevada politics
- Not exactly unique to Nevada as Nuclear facilities (and specifically waste facilities) are also found in Idaho, Colorado, New Mexico and Washington among the western states
- However, the waste repository is unique and “targets” Nevada
- The targeting is not unimaginable as Nevada does offer several logical bases for being the nation’s nuclear waste repository
- These factors link to elements of western politics: geographic size, vast lightly inhabited areas, little water and federal land ownership

Nuclear Waste: Problem

- The back-end of the fuel cycle
- Once you have taken the energy from the fuel the waste remains radioactive and dangerous for generation (if not millenniums)
- A problem of neglect as the initial promise of nuclear power overshadowed consideration of waste: “There was no real interest or profit in dealing with the back end of the fuel cycle” (Carroll Wilson, AEC General Manager).
- A faith that a solution would be found for a problem that would not become serious for 40 or 50 years

Nuclear Waste: Types

- “Those radioactive materials which are of sufficient radiological hazard that they require special care and which are of no present economic value to the nuclear industry” (NRC)
- Four types identified by GAO: Uranium mill tailings, LLNW, spent fuel low level waste, HLNW including transuranic waste
- Yucca Mountain is directed at HLNW (and supposedly non-transuranic) much of which is very long-lived.

- Yucca Mountain is for commercial reactor waste; military HLNW goes to the WIPP site in New Mexico (which is open)

How did Yucca Mountain get Selected?

- Carter Administration begins to address the problem of nuclear waste
- Unfortunately, Carter administration also ends US reprocessing of spent fuel
- The solution is deep geological disposal, supposedly in a monitored retrievable facility
- A process for site selection emerges with the NWPA of 1982
- Multiple criteria used to select potential sites, primarily: geology, geography and climate
- There is supposedly a multiple protection (redundancy) system of both geological and engineered barriers.
- Three original target sites: Yucca, Hanford and Deaf Smith County
- Initial site characterization rather quickly disqualifies Hanford and little work is done at Deaf Smith County.
- The process is contentious and slow so the NWPA 1987 is passed and focuses solely on Yucca to determine if it is suitable (not the best, just suitable). This bill is known as the “Screw Nevada Bill.”

Nevada Response

- Some initial signals of acceptance (we already had NTS)
- Shift quickly to “Hell No” and is embodied by then Governor Richard Bryan
- Is a key campaign issue for Bryan as he becomes Senator
- Nevada public opinion is strongly opposed
- Begins a now 26 battle to stop the project
- Lead agency is the NNPO (focuses only on Yucca not on waste issues linked to nuclear testing)
- NNPO is very effective politically, but is particularly suited for scientific study

- Lawsuits are a key weapon although the State rarely wins. Winning, though, can come through delay.

Some Milestones and Side Bars

- After 1998 the Feds own the waste
- Yucca is to be paid for by the NW Trust fund, which is based on a .millage rate for power generated by nuclear plants
- The waste fund is collected but spent
- Yucca has finally made it to review by NRC for licensing (this could take three years at best)
- Disposal of waste is a major factor limiting expansion of Nukes (The Achilles Heel of the Nuclear Industry)
- Opponents can easily scare the public especially with the transportation issue (“glow trains” and “rolling Chernobyls”)
- Some movement to pursue nukes again as oil prices go up (although nuclear produces energy that isn’t linked to oil)
- Nuclear even gets some play as a “clean alternative” with no greenhouse gases
- Public opinion remains strongly anti-Yucca in Nevada
- Not a particularly important issue in Presidential choice, but a “third rail” issue in state campaigns