

Environmental group objects, but Senate OKs nuke dump site

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An environmental group warns radiation-related disease threatens if nuclear waste is transported through northeastern Illinois on its way to Nevada's Yucca Mountain. The U.S. Senate voted Tuesday evening to store the nation's spent nuclear fuel there by 2010. The Environmental Working Group, a Washington, D.C.-based lobbying group, maintains spent nuclear fuel should travel to Yucca Mountain along sparsely populated routes, that its containers should be safe from terrorist attacks, and that the nation's paramedics and other emergency personnel should get training before loads of waste begin heading toward Nevada in 2010.

Some of that spent nuclear fuel would be removed from the now-closed nuclear power plant in Zion.

Liz Moore, the group's press secretary, said last week the Department of Energy "has not done a transportation plan. Especially since Sept. 11, that is really something that should be done. We want Congress to say no, so the (Energy Department) can be better prepared to move this waste. The mountain is not going anywhere."

Representatives from the group visited Pioneer Press' Arlington Heights office last week. Energy Department representatives and other Yucca Mountain proponents maintain travel routes for the nuclear waste aren't firmly set yet. They also say containers are sufficiently strong, and transportation methods are safe.

More than \$8 billion already has been spent to prepare the mountain to accept waste more than 600 feet underground. The Senate vote overrides the state of Nevada's formal objection to President George W. Bush's Feb. 15 official designation of the site as a nuclear waste repository. The House approved Yucca Mountain as a site by a vote of 306 to 117 on May 8. Despite lobbying from environmental groups, Dick Durbin, Illinois' Democratic senator, Tuesday said he had decided to support the site's designation. Durbin opposed earlier bills that would have provided for 42,000 or more tons of spent fuel to be stored in the mountain.

"We can't allow this nuclear material to sit in pools across Illinois," Durbin said prior to Tuesday evening's vote, referring to the more than 6,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel stored at the state's power plants now.

Last week, press spokeswoman Stacey Zolt said Durbin's concerns regarding a lack of standards for ground water and soil contamination near the mountain were addressed in the newest bill, but he was still torn: "There is still absolutely nothing in the bill about how it's going to be transported to Yucca Mountain ... nothing about the routes, and nothing on paper about what types of containers would be used," she said.

Durbin said Tuesday that he decided to back the bill shortly after the ecological standards were added to it.

Follow-up vowed

Durbin said he would solve the lack of a transportation component in the bill by introducing his own in a separate bill. It would require the waste containment casks be tested to ensure they could withstand intense fires and high-speed collisions. The bill would also require a two-week advance notification of waste shipments. Though there has been no Department of Energy initiative to transfer nuclear waste aboard ship, his bill would also ban inland waterway shipments of nuclear waste, require dedicated trains if it is shipped by rail and establish a cadre of trained escorts to accompany each nuclear waste convoy.

He said he wasn't concerned about letting the Yucca Mountain bill move forward without transportation controls. "This will be coming through every town in America, and I think it will become a significant political issue that will be compelling.

"I grew up in a little town two stops from a railroad track," he said, referring to his boyhood home in East St. Louis. "I understand what it's like."

Republican Illinois Sen. Peter Fitzgerald has supported the Yucca Mountain site since 2000, when President Bill Clinton vetoed a Congress-initiated bill to designate it.

Fitzgerald then said Illinois has the country's biggest nuclear power generation system, and had amassed about 9.5 million pounds of spent fuel (grown to 10.8 million now) that is stored in temporary facilities.

"Illinois consumers are currently paying hundreds of millions of dollars to store this nuclear waste because the federal government has failed to meet its obligations," Fitzgerald said two years ago.

The federal storage project originally was scheduled to take responsibility for nuclear waste storage in 1998.

Routes, risk

The Environmental Working Group has released transportation routes it said are being considered by the Department of Energy.

The group has also publicized data gleaned from an Energy Department theoretical train-wreck scenario in which radioactive cesium is released from a cask containing spent fuel rods. The group published data indicating that those within one mile of such a wreck might number 1,154 in the Chicago area; of those, three would develop cancers instantaneously, and 121 would develop cancers that could be diagnosed within a year.

Jim Cox, the group's senior counsel, said plutonium and cobalt 60 also are found in the rods, but a release of cesium 137 would be the most dangerous. He described cesium 137 as a reactive metal that reacts explosively when immersed in water, and that can become airborne as a fine dust, causing lung cancer, leukemia and other cancers. He said cesium that settles in the ground could remain radioactive for up to 300 years.

Joe Davis, the Energy Department's lead spokesman for the Yucca Mountain project, said last week such scenarios are worst-case, and the canisters now used to haul spent nuclear fuel are difficult to crack.

"We've fired Howitzers at them, hurled them into brick walls at 80 mph, and burned them at over 2,000 degrees, and they don't leak," he said. "We don't think there's a danger at all."

An area fire chief who has helped lead disaster and terrorism preparedness efforts statewide said last week that he's not concerned about trucks and trains hauling radioactive material through northeastern Illinois.

State's prepared

"The containers they ship it in are so designed to be unbelievably impervious to fire, impact and penetration," Northbrook Fire Chief Jay Reardon said. He heads an organization that links most of the state's fire departments, and serves on Gov. George Ryan's terrorism task force.

Reardon added that extra emergency training already is under way here. "Due to the terrorist threats, the preparedness, at least in Illinois, is more than adequate to deal with a 'dirty bomb' incident, so I believe it would be adequate to deal with a nuclear waste accident also," he said. The environmental group's lawyer differs.

"People should be concerned because this cloud would be released so quickly and travel so fast, there is really no way to respond to this," Cox said. "Within a few minutes, it would travel quite a distance, and there is nothing you can do to contain the cloud of cesium."

Moore said The Environmental Working Group produced its own maps of the waste routes because the energy department balked at releasing them.

The energy department's Davis maintains there's no reason to release maps when routes may change many times before trucks and trains begin to transport the nuclear waste in 2010.

Zolt said last week, "We realize that this is eight years down the road, but yes, we want to see it on paper."

Local views

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, speaking against the bill in Congress in May, agreed.

"Congress should recognize the dangers that will be posed to all Americans as a result of nuclear hazmat trucks and trains streaking across our highways, rails and through the neighborhoods of my constituents and millions of people across the country.

"With the horror of Sept. 11 still fresh in our minds, we have pledged to the American people that we will secure their safety ... but this proposal threatens that promise."

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, then spoke in favor of the bill.

"I would like to remind everyone that in the shuttered Zion nuclear power plant just 100 yards from Lake Michigan lies 1,000 tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste. The Great Lakes have another 31 coastline sites where nuclear waste is stored.

"Not one scientist or scientific study claims that storing nuclear waste next to the world's largest supply of fresh water is environmentally sound. ... Without Yucca Mountain, 161 million Americans would have to live their entire lives within 75 miles of a nuclear waste site."

The Nuclear Energy Information Service, a non-profit organization in Evanston, does not officially lobby Congress, but it has taken a stand on the issue, communicating with Illinois' senators and the congressional delegation.

"At the current time, we think the best thing to do is leave the nuclear waste at the reactor sites where it's under supervision," said Dave Kraft, NEIS director. "These sites are supposed to be safe. They're supposed to be guarded."

Kraft noted that while none of the proposed routes for transporting nuclear material in Illinois pass through Evanston, he said, "an accident on any of the routes could affect Evanston if the wind is blowing in the right direction."

"This is not a done deal, even if the vote goes against the state of Nevada," Kraft said prior to Tuesday's Senate vote. "The site still has to have a license reviewed and approved." Staff Intern Simon Shifrin contributed to this story.