

# When It Comes to Atomic Waste Transportation, We All Live in Nevada

## Proposed Dump at Yucca Mountain Would Launch 10's of 1,000's of Atomic Waste Trucks and Trains onto the Roads and Rails of 45 States

### ***Yucca: A Bad Site to Bury Nuclear Waste!***

Does it make any sense to haul up to 100,000 shipments of potentially deadly irradiated nuclear fuel rods from atomic power reactors thousands of miles across the country, within half a mile the homes of 50,000,000 Americans, just to bury them in an earthquake zone near volcanic cones that leaks like a sieve into the drinking water supply below? Energy Secretary Abraham and President Bush seem to think so.

After two decades of Department of Energy (DOE) jerry-rigged site suitability studies at Yucca, Abraham recommended to President Bush on February 14<sup>th</sup> that the national dump for commercial high-level radioactive waste be developed less than 100 miles from Las Vegas, against the will of the vast majority of the State's residents and elected officials. Despite a campaign promise to Nevadans that "sound science" would decide Yucca, not politics, Bush hastily approved Abraham's recommendation the very next day.

Abraham, while serving as Michigan's U.S. Senator from 1994 to 2000, voted time and again in favor of rushing open the Yucca Mountain dump as quickly as possible. Abraham lost his U.S. Senate seat in the fall of 2000, but seems determined to continue to do the bidding of the nuclear utility campaign contributors who supported his failed run.

Abraham's recommendation, and Bush's approval, to open Yucca flies in the face of fair play, prudent policy, and sound science.

Like a page out of the script from the Enron/Arthur Anderson debacle, DOE's own Inspector General reported in November 2001 that the law firm Winston and Strawn had been engaged as a lobbyist for the pro-dump trade association Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI) at the very same time that it was supposed to be performing objective, unbiased legal analyses for the Yucca Mountain Project. Winston and Strawn resigned from its DOE contract shortly after the report's release, but this raises serious questions about the law firm's Yucca Mountain Project work being tainted with bias dating all the way back to 1992.

Similarly, DOE's managing and operations contractor at Yucca up until February, 2001 – TRW, Inc. – simultaneously worked as an NEI lobbyist on nuclear

waste disposal issues, and was identified as the author of a memo leaked in Dec. 2000 stating that "the technical suitability of the site is less of a concern to Congress than the broader issue of whether the nuclear waste problem can be solved at an affordable price in both financial and political terms." Political expediency and the nuclear industry's bottom line, not sound science, has driven the Yucca Mountain Project from the beginning. In fact, the 1987 amendments to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act that singled out politically-vulnerable Nevada (due to its smaller population and Congressional delegation) from numerous other states being considered for the proposed nuclear waste dump is better known as the "Screw Nevada bill".

On December 21<sup>st</sup>, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), the nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress, reported that the DOE's Yucca Mountain Project should delay any dump site recommendation until 2006 due to 293 incomplete scientific and technical studies. Abraham and Bush disregarded GAO's official advice, and gave their thumb's up to Yucca a mere two months later.

On January 24<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board, a panel of expert scientists and engineers presidentially appointed to oversee the quality of technical studies at Yucca Mountain, reported that "When the DOE's technical and scientific work is taken as a whole, the Board's view is that the technical basis for the DOE's repository performance estimates is weak to moderate at this time." In other words, little confidence can be placed in DOE's predictions that harmful radiation will not leak into the underlying groundwater over the many thousands of years the nuclear waste will remain hazardous, contaminating the drinking water supply of Nevada's largest dairy herd and other farms downstream. Despite this warning from the expert scientific oversight panel, Abraham and Bush approved the plan just three weeks later.

### ***Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right: Rushing Waste Shipments Invites Disaster***

High-level nuclear waste must be moved someday. It cannot stay where it is forever. It is presently stored at reactor sites, which are located on

bodies of water such as lakes, rivers, and sea coasts. Irradiated fuel rods are dangerous no matter where they are, whether in storage ponds or dry cask storage silos at reactor sites, being transported, or being stored or dumped at any location, no matter where.

So what is the solution to the nuclear waste dilemma? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The first step must be to stop making more as soon as possible. There is currently over 40,000 tons of high-level atomic waste in the U.S. If the 103 currently operating reactors continue generating waste till the end of their 40 year permits, that amount will more than double. If these reactors are granted 20 year extensions to their operating licenses, as is now a rubber stamp process thanks to the compliant U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (more lapdog than watchdog of the industry), that mountain of waste will grow even bigger. If new reactors get built, as the nuclear industry hopes and the Bush Administration is advocating in its National Energy Policy, then we could be looking at tripling or quadrupling the size of the problem. In fact, the Bush/Cheney Energy Plan (and the nuclear utility executives who helped shape it behind closed doors) counts on Yucca Mountain as the supposed "solution" to the vexing problem of nuclear waste, and see it as the key to their coveted "nuclear renaissance" (or relapse, depending on how you look at it).

But what should be done with the nuclear waste that already exists, even if reactors are closed today? Wastes should only be moved if doing so improves the problem, not if doing so worsens the problem. Moving tens of thousands of waste containers by train and truck at 60 miles per hour on the roads and rails through urban population centers and the agricultural heartland should only be undertaken for very good, well considered, and well established reasons. Yucca miserably fails at such criteria.

Severe accidents releasing radiation from transport containers could unleash unprecedented catastrophes. DOE, in its 1986 Environmental Assessment of Yucca, admitted that an accident in a rural setting could cost \$620 million and take 15 months to clean up, contaminating 42 square miles of land. A Nov. 2001 report by the State of Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects calculated that had a train that caught fire and burned for out of control for several days in a tunnel beneath the densely populated downtown of Baltimore in July 2001 been carrying high-level nuclear waste aboard, the resulting radiation release would have cost \$14 billion to clean up; not cleaning up such contamination could have caused tens of thousands of cancer deaths in future decades resulting from exposure to the radioactive contamination.

In recommending that Yucca is suitable for nuclear waste dumping, Energy Secretary Abraham stated "We should consolidate the nuclear wastes to

enhance protection against terrorists attacks by moving them to one underground location that is far from population centers." President Bush added "Proceeding with the repository program is necessary to protect public safety, health, and the Nation's security because successful completion of this project would isolate in a geologic repository at a remote location highly radioactive materials now scattered throughout the Nation." Besides ignoring the fact that Yucca is less than 100 miles from Las Vegas, the fastest growing city in the country, such statements also overlook a couple critical facts. One is that every single nuclear waste shipment would itself represent a vulnerable terrorist target, rolling through major population centers on the roads and rails. NRC and U.S. Army tests have shown that nuclear waste shipping containers are vulnerable to anti-tank missiles and high explosives. A second oversight is that, as long as nuclear reactors continue operating, high-level nuclear waste will be stored on-site. Federal regulations require that irradiated fuel rods cool for at least five years in storage pools before being transported away. Besides, the tens of thousands of shipments to Yucca would take 25 years or more to complete, not exactly a quick response to imminent terrorist threats. New reactors that Yucca's opening would "justify" would represent new terrorist targets as well. The first and most important step to defend against such terrorist attacks is to shut down the reactors and stop generating highly radioactive waste.

### ***What Can You Do?***

Contact your U.S. Senators and Representative right away. Urge them to support Nevada's veto of the Yucca Mountain dump, to vote against Mobile Chernobyls and dumping nuclear wastes in a leaky earthquake zone. Call the Capitol Switchboard at 202.224.3121 to be plugged through to your Members of Congress, or write: The Honorable (full name); US Senate; Washington, D.C. 20510 or The Honorable (full name), US House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515. Contact NIRS for the names of your Members.

Help organize local, county, and State resolutions against nuclear waste transportation through your area. These carry a loud political message for decision-makers in Washington, D.C.

Write letters to the editor and opinion/editorial pieces to your local newspapers.

Host a house party, or set up an info table at your local food co-op or student union, and get others to do these action steps too.

Get sample letters, resolutions, and op/eds from NIRS, or view them at our website.

Updated 3/4/02 by Kevin Kamps, Nuclear Information & Resource Service, 1424 16<sup>th</sup> St. NW #404, Washington, D.C. 20036, 202.328.0002, (f) 202.462.2183, [kevin@nirs.org](mailto:kevin@nirs.org), [www.nirs.org](http://www.nirs.org)