

New Mexico May Be the Dump for More Radioactive Wastes

The United States has created nuclear waste that we don't know what to do with. For a large portion of that waste – 160,000,000 curies – from commercial nuclear power plants, the Department of Energy (DOE) is considering burying it in the ground – likely in New Mexico. **But people can speak out against DOE's plans!**

What are DOE's Plans?

DOE has released a *Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Disposal of Greater-Than-Class C (GTCC) Low-Level Radioactive Waste and GTCC-Like Waste*. Current regulations say that GTCC wastes should be disposed in a geologic repository. The only such site considered is the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), east of Carlsbad. Some other sites – including WIPP-Vicinity and Los Alamos National Lab (LANL) – are being considered for near-surface burial in “enhanced trenches,” vaults, or intermediate-depth boreholes. Other sites are Nevada Test Site, Hanford (WA), Idaho National Lab, and the Savannah River Site (SC). The DEIS also states that some non-DOE sites might be considered, but no such site is identified.

What is Greater-Than-Class C (GTCC) Waste?

GTCC waste is dangerous to humans and the environment for hundreds of years and is not generally acceptable for near-surface disposal. Low-level radioactive waste has four classes – A, B, C, and more highly radioactive GTCC. The DEIS discusses three types of GTCC:

Activated metals from decommissioning the 104 commercial nuclear reactors and any new plants. The DEIS states that activated metals are 2,000 cubic meters by volume and 160,000,000 curies of radioactivity.

Sealed sources are radioactive materials enclosed in metal containers that are used to find oil and gas, test equipment and structures, and diagnose and treat illnesses. The DEIS states that sealed sources are about 2,900 cubic meters by volume and 2,000,000 curies of radioactivity.

Other waste includes radioactively contaminated equipment and trash. The DEIS states that other waste is about 6,700 cubic meters by volume and 1,300,000 curies of radioactivity.

The DEIS also includes DOE “GTCC-like” waste – about 2,800 cubic meters by volume and 1,000,000 curies of radioactivity.

Why is This Important to New Mexicans?

WIPP's mission is limited by law to 175,564 cubic meters of transuranic waste from nuclear weapons. That's less than 5,000,000 curies of radioactivity. GTCC waste would be *30 times more radioactivity* than planned for WIPP and would eliminate the ban on commercial waste. Further, if some large amounts of commercial waste can come to WIPP, many people would likely think that the legal ban on high-level waste and spent nuclear fuel could also be eliminated. WIPP would then be the *only geologic disposal site* and all highly radioactive waste would be transported through New Mexico for many decades and buried here forever.

LANL buries its low-level radioactive waste in unlined trenches, pits and shafts at Area G. The final determination by DOE and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) of what happens to the hazardous and radioactive wastes at Area G has not yet been made and is a highly controversial issue. A decision to bury GTCC waste would predetermine that other waste (which contain much less radioactivity) also could be buried there, posing a threat to groundwater for generations to come.

There are Better Alternatives!

The DEIS rejects the alternative that many New Mexicans and people from around the country advocated at DOE's GTCC scoping meetings in 2007. That alternative is "Hardened On-Site Storage" (HOSS) in which GTCC waste and irradiated spent fuel would remain at commercial nuclear power plants in long-term storage so that they can be monitored and are protected from aircraft crashes or terrorist attacks. Keeping the waste in HOSS would reduce the risk of accidents or a terrorist attack during transport. While HOSS is not a permanent solution, it would be more protective of human health and the environment than any of DOE's current dumping practices and the alternatives presented in the DEIS. HOSS would be a safe way of storing wastes until a scientifically sound, publicly acceptable solution is found. Part of that future solution, of course, should be drastically minimizing the generation of those wastes. DOE's reason for rejecting HOSS is that it is "not a permanent disposal facility."

But the DEIS also does not include consideration of any geologic disposal facility, except WIPP, even though for almost 30 years federal law (Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982) has required development of one or more other repositories. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has determined that spent nuclear fuel can stay at commercial reactors for up to 100 years. So GTCC could also remain at those sites for at least that time period.

DOE should not proceed with a final GTCC EIS, but instead should develop a new DEIS that includes HOSS facilities as the best solution for GTCC wastes for decades to come and for new geologic disposal site(s) to dispose of GTCC waste. Tell DOE to do just that!

"GTCC-like" waste is not subject to the NRC requirements for geologic disposal. DOE should issue a supplement to its 1997 *Final Waste Management Environmental Impact Statement* to look at the reasonable alternatives for "GTCC-like" waste and other wastes for which long-term storage and disposal is not determined.

What Can I Do?

Voice your opinion at upcoming public hearings and submit written comments.

Public hearings in New Mexico will be held at the following locations and times:

- *Carlsbad*: Pecos River Village Conference Center, Carousel House, 711 Muscatel Avenue, Tuesday, April 26, 2011, 5:30 – 9:30 p.m. (Public comment begins at 7 p.m.)
- *Albuquerque*: Marriott Pyramid North, 5151 San Francisco, NE, Wednesday, April 27, 2011, 5:30 – 9:30 p.m. (Public comment begins at 7 p.m.)
- *Santa Fe*: Cities of Gold Hotel Conference Center, 10-B Cities of Gold Road, Pojoaque, Thursday, April 28, 2011, 5:30 p.m. – 9:30 p.m. (Public comment begins at 7 p.m.)

The deadline for written comments to DOE is June 27, 2011. Submit to:

Arnold Edelman, Document Manager, DOE GTCC EIS, Cloverleaf Bld., EM-43, 1000 Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC 20585, or
E-mail: gtcceis@anl.gov.

More information can be found and written comments also can be submitted at:
<http://www.gtcceis.anl.gov>

For more information:

Southwest Research and Information Center. (505) 262-1862. www.sric.org
Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping. (505) 266-2663. www.cardnm.org
Concerned Citizen for Nuclear Safety. (505) 986-1973. www.nuclearactive.org
Nuclear Watch New Mexico. (505) 989-7342. www.nukewatch.org