

Committee to Bridge the Gap

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EIS000390

STATEMENT OF BILL MAGAVERN ON BEHALF OF THE COMMITTEE TO BRIDGE THE GAP REGARDING U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY'S DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR A GEOLOGIC REPOSITORY FOR THE DISPOSAL OF SPENT NUCLEAR FUEL AND HIGH-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE AT YUCCA MOUNTAIN, NYE COUNTY, NEVADA

PRESENTED AT THE PUBLIC HEARING IN
RENO, NEVADA
DECEMBER 1, 1999

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Burying highly irradiated nuclear fuel at Yucca Mountain, as proposed by this draft environmental impact statement, would be a massive public works project that would leave a toxic legacy for hundreds of thousands of years. The extremely hazardous and long-lived nature of the waste to be buried necessitates the strictest and most searching environmental review. Legally, the National Environmental Policy Act requires an examination of the environmental consequences of the proposed action and alternatives.

The history of nuclear weapons and nuclear power in the United States is full of secrecy, cover-ups and outright lies, from the promise that nuclear power would be "safe and too cheap to meter" to the hushing up of the dangers of radiation fallout from atmospheric bomb tests. Given that history, the DOE needs to be especially careful to be completely honest and open with the American people about the health and safety effects of the proposed Yucca Mountain repository.

Unfortunately, the document prepared by the Department of Energy falls well short of that standard. The State of Nevada, the 50 million people living near nuclear waste transportation routes, and all the American people concerned about contamination of water, food, air and land deserve a more honest and informative statement of the risks involved before such a massive radioactive waste transportation and burial project should be contemplated.

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1. The “No-Action Alternative” is not credible. EIS000390

2 [The alternative discussed in the DEIS is so far-fetched as to be unreasonable, and completely valueless as a point of comparison with the proposed action. One of the scenarios posits the waste staying on its current sites under institutional control for at least 10,000 years; the other assumes the waste stays put in perpetuity, but with institutional control for only 100 years. The DEIS correctly recognizes that neither scenario is likely. One can hardly imagine society abandoning control of such hazardous material in 100 years; chances of the waste staying where it is for 10,000 years are very slim. Such far-fetched scenarios present no useful baseline for comparison; indeed, they appear to have been chosen precisely because they make the proposed action – moving the waste to Yucca Mountain -- look more desirable.]

2. The DEIS does not acknowledge the lethal nature of the waste, and fails to provide sufficient information on the radiological characteristics of highly irradiated nuclear fuel.

3 [An adequate environmental review of the proposed repository program must absolutely address the deadly nature of the waste to be shipped and buried, yet DOE barely touches on the radiological risks posed by highly irradiated nuclear fuel. Information on the total activity (in curies) and the surface dose rate (in rems per hour) of the assemblies of irradiated fuel is essential for the assessment of risks posed by the transportation and burial of radioactive waste, yet DOE does not provide such data.

According to the State of Nevada, a typical assembly from a pressurized water reactor will contain, even after 26 years of cooling, 31,000 curies of cesium-137 and 21,000 curies of strontium-90, and is a powerful source of penetrating gamma and neutron radiation. One unshielded assembly would have enough radiation to give a person standing next to it a dose of at least 100 rem per minute. After only two minutes of such exposure, cancer risk would roughly double, and symptoms of radiation sickness would probably appear. Ten minutes exposure would be enough to deliver a speedy but painful death to virtually all people exposed. Furthermore, shipping waste as fresh as five years old to the repository is contemplated, and should therefore have been included in the DEIS as a possible scenario, one which would carry even greater radiological risk.]

3. The DEIS does not sufficiently describe the impacts of transporting radioactive waste to Yucca Mountain.

4 [The proposed action would require a massive nuclear waste transportation program without precedent. Highly irradiated nuclear fuel would have to travel by train and truck through 43 states, past homes, schools, and workplaces. An estimated 50 million Americans live near the likely transportation routes. The DEIS should map the specific routes and analyze potential impacts of the shipping campaign. But this DEIS does not tell the American people where the waste will travel.] [Nor does it tell local emergency responders what training and equipment they will need to respond in the event

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of an accident. The DEIS also fails to address the potential loss in property value of communities along the transportation routes.

4. The DEIS does not adequately address environmental justice concerns.

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DOE notes “Native American tribes in the region consider the intrusive nature of the repository and continuation of restrictions on access to lands where the repository would be located to have an adverse impact on all elements of the natural and physical environment and to their way of living within that environment.” Given this major concern of a minority group that has already suffered numerous invasions of its territory and pollution of its land in epic proportions, how can DOE credibly claim “there would be no disproportionately high and adverse impacts to minority or low-income populations as a result of the Proposed Action?” The DEIS simply continues the U.S. government’s historical practice of brushing aside the concerns of Native Americans.

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One should not think that moving nuclear waste from its current sites to Yucca Mountain would take the problem off our hands. The proposed action would in fact create a whole host of new environmental problems. The DEIS does not do its job of informing the American people of the risks of burying nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain.