



Cleveland Peace Action

Peace House, 10916 Magnolia Drive, Cleveland, OH 44106

CLEVELAND PEACE ACTION STATEMENT ON THE YUCCA MOUNTAIN PROJECT

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Prepared by Cleveland Peace Action Executive Committee:
Francis Chiappa, Vice President
Marji Edguer, President
Donald McPherson, Secretary/Treasurer

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For more information, call 216-231-4245 or e-mail chiapski@aol.com

I am speaking on behalf of Cleveland Peace Action, the local chapter of Peace Action, a national grassroots organization working for peace and disarmament. Peace Action was formed by the merger of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in 1987. Our concerns are primarily in the areas of nuclear and conventional weaponry and the effects of military spending on the U.S. economy. We felt it necessary to comment on the Yucca Mountain Project (YMP) in part because some of the waste to be buried there is a product of nuclear weapons production. The nature of the various materials proposed for interment at Yucca Mountain is testimony to the inextricable relationship between nuclear weapons and nuclear power. Where there is nuclear power, weapons grade materials may be produced. The old slogan notwithstanding, there are no "atoms for peace." To quote from the EIS, "High-level radioactive waste is primarily waste that resulted from the chemical extraction of weapons-usable materials from...spent nuclear fuel (p. S-4)."

1 We do appreciate the Department of Energy's attempt to thoughtfully and carefully devise a long-range plan for the disposal of 70,000 metric tons of nuclear waste. While we believe there are major problems with the YMP, we are even more worried about the disposal of nuclear wastes in many other nations. In countries lacking democratic traditions there will be no environmental impact statements, no public hearings, no openness in the process for siting and burial. Worldwide, there will be hundreds of thousands of metric tons to be disposed of, in coming decades. Many nations will not do this safely and effectively. Many people will die and their land will be poisoned, for all practical considerations, forever. This makes the continued development of nuclear power, as well as nuclear weapons, seem reckless and irresponsible. Added to these concerns is the prospect that spent nuclear fuel can be reprocessed into weapons-usable materials. Thus nuclear power is likely to fuel the proliferation of nuclear weapons around the globe. Pandora's box has been opened. The YMP is an attempt to close the box. It's a better attempt than we anticipate elsewhere, but not without problems.

Long-term consequences of a repository at Yucca Mountain

EIS001287

- 2 One of our concerns with the YMP is the effect buried wastes could have over the very long periods during which they will remain radioactive. The EIS uses two time frames of analysis. One is "short-term" - the next hundred years. The second is "long-term," - the next 10,000 years. In our fast paced society, where short-term often means the next three months, or the next year, 10,000 years seems an absurdly long-time. But consider the half-life of Plutonium 239, one the radioactive elements proposed to be buried in Yucca Mountain. It has a radioactive half-life of 24,360 years. This means that after that time period, half the radioactivity remains. After a mere 10,000 years, the plutonium in the repository would be about 80% as dangerous as when it was first buried. After 100,000 years, tens times longer than the "long-term" effects period analyzed in the EIS, one-sixteenth of the radioactivity will remain. This is a quite a lot, considering that plutonium is the most deadly substance known, with one particle lodged in a lung almost certain to result in a cancer. We find it incredible that the EIS does not discuss the radioactive half-life of the elements to be buried at Yucca Mountain. If it had been discussed in the EIS it would beg a question about what "long-term" really means. And the answer would be "much longer than 10,000 years."

What will be left of America in ten thousand years? Will the U.S. Government survive? What about the State of Nevada? Who will be here to reap the deadly harvest of the seeds to be sown in Yucca Mountain? One hundred thousand years may seem an inconceivably long time. But at the end of that period, significant radioactivity would continue to emit inside Yucca Mountain. With some luck it would remain contained there. Consider that in one hundred thousand years, the North American continent is likely to drift 2.5 km or more than 1.5 miles from it's present location. I ask, with some seriousness, where will Yucca Mountain be by then? And what will happen to the storage canisters and the still deadly nuclear waste within them? The EIS estimates the probability of volcanic disruption at or near the repository was one in 7000. No doubt the probability over one hundred thousand years is much greater. One hundred thousand years may seem inconceivable, but the EIS must still make some attempt to conceive it, to examine the truly long-term consequences of the burial of this waste.

Transportation Issues

- 3 Transportation of 70,000 metric tons of nuclear waste is also a concern. The proposed transportation routes would have over 6,900 casks passing through the state of Ohio. All
 4... the possible routes involve passing through both densely populated areas and rural areas of fertile farmland, one of Ohio's principal natural resources. A single accident could have major ramifications for much of Ohio. The potential risk of a significant release of radiation, though statistically small, could be incalculably catastrophic. There are too many uncertainties with rail or highway transportation. Too many potential hazards exist: accidents, other drivers, weather problems, road or track problems, which could ultimately compromise safety.

5 Furthermore, the proposed transportation casks have never been fully tested – they were only tested as one-quarter scale models - with extrapolations to full scale from these tests. In the past the DoE has argued that simulated tests are insufficient with nuclear weapons. Now it wants us to trust it to transport vast quantities of nuclear wastes without full scale testing of casks.

4 cont. The costs of any leaks or accidents will effect the environment we live in for thousands of years. A major accident would pose obvious risks in terms of cancer but it would also poison farmland, effect watersheds, and flora and fauna in the vicinity. And it appears that studies minimize the health effects on humans by only identifying the cancer risk, while ignoring other effects of radiation exposure. It is unconscionable to take such genetic, teratogenic, and environmental risks.

Native American claims to Yucca Mountain

6... The Ruby Valley Treaty of 1863 gives the Yucca Mountain region to the use of the Western Shoshone tribe. After the creation of the Nevada Test Site, the Western Shoshone, in 1950, filed suit claiming that the federal government had taken their land. Subsequently the Indian Claims Commission found that the Western Shoshone title had gradually been extinguished and it set a monetary award as payment. But the tribe has not accepted the ruling or the money despite a Supreme Court ruling the payment had been made.

The nuclear weapons nations of the world have made a habit of conducting nuclear weapons tests on the lands of indigenous peoples. As far as we know, on a worldwide basis, no nuclear test has ever been conducted on land that was not expropriated from native people. The YMP follows in this dubious tradition of environmental racism. It uses land taken from the Western Shoshone tribe, under the Ruby Valley Treaty, for a use that never could have been anticipated by the Native American signers of that treaty. The time is overdue for the federal government to stop ~~taking~~ abrogating treaties made with indigenous people.

The EIS contains at least one remark smacking of racism. The summary (p.43) states, of Native American people, "They believe that the water, animals, plants, air, geology, sacred sites, and artifacts are interrelated and dependent on each other for existence." The use of the word "they" seeks to differentiate these people from the mainstream of American society, whose beliefs are presumed rational, modern, and scientific. The EIS implies that Indian people's beliefs about the land are magical and irrational. Western Shoshone spiritual leader Corbin Harney has often invoked the mantra: "One Earth, One Water, One Air." Actually this amounts to a succinct statement of an environmental sensibility, which has swept this nation since the early 1970's. This sentiment is actually well grounded in scientific theory, which increasingly attests to the interconnectedness of all things in this biosphere of ours.

6 cont.

The idea of ownership of land does not fit well with Native American philosophies. One may live on land, in essence borrowing it while one is here. One's obligation is careful stewardship of that land, as it will be needed by future generations. The YMP, to put it mildly, would be a far cry from stewardship, rendering the land off limits and even inhospitable for over 100,000 years. Yucca Mountain should revert to the stewardship of the Western Shoshone nation.

Evaluating the alternatives

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Cost comparisons for the two alternatives – YMP and “no-action” – favor the YMP. But the no-action alternative is little more than a straw man. The cost to transport the waste, bury it in Yucca Mountain, and close the repository after 100 years is estimated to be \$28.8 Billion in 1998 dollars. It assumes no costs after the 100-year project. Taking no action is estimated to cost \$51.5 to \$56.7 Billion for the first 100 years and about \$500 Million per year for the next 9900 years, for a total cost (if our math is correct) of around \$5 Trillion. But the no-action alternative is not practical. No one in his or her right mind would believe the present storage system can work in any sense – in terms of environment, cost, or security - in the long-term. But this doesn't mean that burying the waste now, in Yucca Mountain, is the only other option.

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The YMP provides only a partial solution to the potential dangers of keeping hazardous waste at the existing 72 commercial and five DoE facilities. Moving 70,000 metric tons of nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain would not result in safety for most workers or local communities because most of these 77 facilities will continue to operate, producing more radioactive waste. Not long ago, Sweden voted to close down all its nuclear facilities and was condemned by the Clinton administration for it. But we believe that is exactly what should be done in the U.S. Any action, which would cause the public and policy makers to believe a solution to the hazards of nuclear operations has been found, will just add to the problem. How many Yucca Mountains will be needed before we put an end to this folly?

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By moving nuclear waste from on-site storage, we create an illusion that we have a permanent solution, and thereby reduce the funding and motivation to create real long-term solutions. While we know there is no long-term solution in existence currently, we believe strongly that one must be discovered or created. We assert that on-site storage until a long-term, permanent solution is developed will be the only thing that will pressure the government and the utility companies search for this solution.

Conclusion

Cleveland Peace Action believes the wisest course^{is} to postpone action on the YMP until nuclear power and nuclear weapons production has been terminated and a truly viable alternative for the long-term disposition of these deadly substances is found. Our children and grandchildren do not deserve a world poisoned beyond repair by our mistakes. We need to continue to search for a solution that will be more than an illusion. Anything less is morally reprehensible.