



March 26, 2009

Waste dump has support in New Mexico that Yucca Mountain doesn't have in Nevada

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Longtime Carlsbad Mayor Bob Forrest recalls the days when no one wanted to take the federal government's radioactive waste except his southern New Mexico community.

Ten years after it opened, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, commonly known as WIPP, remains the government's only radioactive waste dump.

But now, Forrest says, the climate for all things nuclear has changed, and communities across the nation are fighting for projects.

Forrest himself believes the vast, 250 million-year-old salt beds that house WIPP east of his community of about 25,000 could store high-level nuclear waste such as that once destined for the Yucca Mountain project the Obama administration is apparently abandoning.

Such a repository would be separate from WIPP, he said.

WIPP, excavated 2,150 feet below the surface of the desert, is designed for so-called transuranic waste generated by the nation's defense work — such things as plutonium-contaminated rags, tools or clothing. Although it takes some defense waste that's so radioactive it's handled by robotic machines, high-level and commercial nuclear waste are prohibited.

Some worry that could change as the nation looks for a place to put nearly 60,000 tons of highly radioactive fuel rods generated by the nuclear power industry.

For two decades, Yucca Mountain in the Nevada desert northwest of Las Vegas was the focus of government plans for such waste. But earlier this month, Energy Secretary Steven Chu said Yucca Mountain no longer is viewed as an option.

Instead, Chu said the administration believes used reactor fuel can remain at power plants while a comprehensive plan for disposal is developed. He hopes to have a recommendation from a special panel on alternatives to Yucca Mountain and long-term disposal before the end of the year.

Forrest said Monday he has high hopes of making the Carlsbad area "the next Yucca Mountain" and will lobby for such a project. It would be separate from WIPP in another part of the salt beds.

"The community's ready, the timing couldn't be better. ... I think the stage is right to move forward," Forrest said.

He believes Carlsbad would be behind the idea — unlike Nevada was with Yucca Mountain.

Polls conducted by Nevada newspapers consistently showed most Nevadans opposed the project, and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., vowed to starve it of funds.

"If you don't have the community support you can't get to first base," Forrest said. "That's the key to our success (with WIPP) but it didn't happen overnight."

State Environment Secretary Ron Curry said there will always be some who want to expand WIPP's mission, but noted Gov. Bill Richardson ordered the state Environment Department to modify WIPP's permit to ensure high-level reactor waste isn't stored at the site.

Curry does not favor a Yucca Mountain-type facility, even if it's not part of WIPP.

"The federal government must abide by the promise it made to New Mexicans more than a decade ago and focus on WIPP's original purpose to dispose of only transuranic waste," he said. "We will vigorously oppose any attempt to expand or alter the mission of WIPP to allow high-level waste."

Don Hancock of the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque, a longtime WIPP watchdog, said the idea of burying high-level defense waste or nuclear fuel at WIPP keeps coming up — despite being prohibited by the land withdrawal act that authorized the permanent repository.

He said the administration's recent actions over Yucca Mountain have raised concerns, but he believes New Mexicans would fight any attempt to put such a repository in the state.

Waste that would go into a Yucca Mountain-type dump "is orders of magnitude different (from WIPP) in terms of the order of radioactivity, in terms of the physical heat generated," he said. Hancock also said scientific studies that came up during hearings over WIPP demonstrated salt was unsuitable for such waste.

Roger Nelson, chief scientist for the DOE's Carlsbad field office, said if Yucca Mountain is to be replaced, the nation should consider disposal in salt.

Nelson said that doesn't mean WIPP.

"WIPP has a mission. It's been designed and legislated and authorized," he said. "If Congress or any other agency wanted to change WIPP, it would jeopardize this mission that is working so well."

There are other places — the formation where WIPP lies covers thousands of square miles that are virtually contiguous into central Kansas, "so there's a lot of real estate for a salt repository in the U.S.," he said.

From the beginning of the nuclear age in the 1940s, scientists studied what to do with radioactive waste that remains dangerous for tens of thousands of years. Early ideas included sending it on a rock to the sun or burying it in deep sea subduction zones.

Eventually, they turned to salt beds.

"The safest way to isolate something that you don't want for a very, very long time is find an ancient salt formation and put your waste in the middle," Nelson said. "Salt is still there for a very good reason, it has not been eroded away. It's indicator of hydrological stability. The same hydrological barriers that protect the salt will protect the waste."

Still, some critics have argued for years the WIPP site is the wrong place.

Concerns over water leaching into the salt were raised in numerous hearings on the repository over the years; the DOE eventually dismissed them. But Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping scheduled a news conference in Albuquerque on WIPP's 10th anniversary Thursday to release a hydrological report that argues the conceptual groundwater model used to assess the WIPP site was fatally flawed.

Forrest has proposed advertising in major newspapers that Carlsbad has a solution for nuclear power waste. In recent years, Carlsbad has competed for, but lost, projects to make fuel for commercial nuclear power plants.

"It's been a lifesaver for us, and there's a lot of potential for more projects," the mayor said. "As long as we keep safety as the No. 1 issue, I think the sky's the limit."

