



EPA hopes to have new Yucca radiation standard early next year

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WASHINGTON - Trying to overcome a possibly crippling court decision, the Environmental Protection Agency hopes to have a proposal by early next year on new radiation exposure limits at a proposed nuclear waste site in Nevada.

Jeffrey Holmstead, chief of EPA's air and radiation programs, told a panel of scientists Monday that a wide range of options is being considered that would not require Congress to intervene in the politically charged issue.

The future of the waste project at Yucca Mountain in the Nevada desert was put into jeopardy when a federal appeals court rejected an EPA radiation exposure standard in July that was tied to 10,000 years into the future, even though some of the waste will be at its most dangerous thousands of years later.

The court said EPA failed to take into account a 1995 National Academy of Sciences recommendation that the standard be set at periods of peak-radiation, although Congress required that the recommendations be followed. Opponents of the project have argued that the design of the waste site as it is now contemplated cannot meet a standard set that far into the future.

At a meeting Monday, members of the Board of Radioactive Waste Management, a part of the National Academy of Sciences, examined implications of the court case and possible options for future action. The board frequently offers a forum to examine waste management issues.

Robert Fri, chairman of the National Academy panel that wrote the 1995 report cited by the court, suggested the EPA satisfy the court's objections only by significantly altering its standard more in line with what his group had recommended.

That would involve going well beyond 10,000 years, but not necessarily so far into the future that risk modeling, or even the proposed Yucca design, might be useless, Fri suggested.

EPA would have to adopt a less conservative approach to determining public risks from exposure, said Fri, a scholar at the environmental think tank Resources for the Future.

Holmstead said the EPA is "at the beginning of the process of determining what options might be" available but would not discuss specific proposals. Going beyond 10,000 years for a radiation

standard "is a real challenge," he conceded.

Congress also could intervene by passing legislation to free the EPA from having to take into consideration the 1995 National Academy recommendations.

Sam Fowler, the senior Democratic staff member on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, told the scientists such a move could appear to the public as Congress "trying to dumb down the standard" for political reasons. Strong opposition to the Yucca project by Nevada's congressional delegation also would make it difficult to pass such legislation.

Whether the impasse over an acceptable radiation standard eventually could scuttle the Yucca Mountain project remains to be seen. Nevertheless, supporters acknowledge it casts serious doubt on the Energy Department's plan to open the waste site by 2010.

Trying to establish public risks tens of thousands of years into the future is a staggering undertaking, scientists acknowledged at Monday's meeting.

[BACK](#) 