

News > Local (/News/Local/)

Panel learns: Nothing happens fast when it comes to fate of nuke waste

By RICHIE DAVIS
Recorder Staff

Sunday, July 01, 2018

BRATTLEBORO, Vt. — By year's end, the 58 casks of high-level waste at the site of the shuttered Vermont Yankee plant will either become part of NorthStar Group Services, which seeks to buy the remains of the former nuclear plant to decommission it, or it will remain idle for 60 years under the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's "SAFSTOR" designation.

That's what Joseph Lynch, the plant's senior government affairs manager told the Decommissioning Citizens Advisory Panel last week, as the 52nd cask was being prepared for the storage plant on site.

Panel members heard from a U.S. Department of Energy official that from the time there is a congressional decision to proceed with the stalled process to find a high-level federal waste repository or an interim storage facility for spent fuel from the nation's commercial reactors — along with appropriation of money for it — it would take seven years to build the necessary rail transportation capability for it to begin.

The Trump administration has been urging Congress to resume the program of trying to set up a federal repository at Yucca Mountain, and Waste Control Specialists (WCS), which operates the West Texas low-level waste repository where Vermont Yankee's low-level waste has been sent as part of a Texas-Vermont compact, has also been lobbying federal officials to establish a pilot interim high-level waste repository on a different part of its sprawling site, the panel was told by Richard Saudek, a member of the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Compact Commission.

Saudek said that when the facility — which also includes a nuclear waste repository for federal waste — was first approved under the control of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, it was believed that it sits on the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest aquifer in the country.

"There is no doubt that's not our business," said Saudek when pressed on that matter by Putney resident Derek Jordan. "Our business is to handle compact waste."

WCS is owned by the holding company that owns NorthStar, which is awaiting a decision by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Vermont Public Utility Commission on its planned purchase of Vermont Yankee for decommissioning.

"The interim storage facility is an important facility for us," panel member Lissa Weinmann of Brattleboro, Vt., said, "As we contemplate the sale, and the faster redevelopment of the Vermont Yankee site, the existence of a high-level facility where that waste could potentially be transported in the next 20, 30, 40, whatever years, is really important to us as we contemplate this sale. So if a pilot facility was approved and that pilot facility just happens to be Waste Control Specialists, which is what it looks like because of the lobbying going on around it, that's something that's going to be very meaningful for us one way or another."



She noted that the advisory panel has already signed a letter "a couple of years ago" saying it wanted its waste to be removed from the Vernon site as soon as possible.

The panel also heard from aides to Vermont's two U.S. senators and lone congressman about a House bill, H.R. 3053, which would amend the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act to direct DOE to begin a program to consolidate and temporarily store commercial spent fuel during development, construction, and operation of a permanent repository.

Chris Williams of Hancock, who works with Citizens Awareness Network and Vermont Yankee Decommissioning Alliance, told the three aides, "It's a parking lot ... it gets it the hell out of here. It entails moving it twice. Moving it once is a big deal."

He added, "I would encourage all our congressional delegation to really push something that I know isn't getting a lot of traction these days in Washington: push science. It was science that created this mess."