

Yucca Mountain Travesty

Shall we shed our waste on thee?

Yucca Mountain is a ridge of volcanic rock, millions of years old and 90 miles from Las Vegas in Nye County, Nevada. In 1987, Yucca Mountain was the only site in the country designated by the U.S. Congress for study as a possible repository of high-level radioactive waste. The proposed repository is located on the Nevada Test site, near the Nellis Air Force Bombing Range, on land the Western Shoshone Tribe considers sacred.

The federal government and the nuclear power industry have much invested in Yucca Mountain, as do state, tribal, and local elected officials; scientists and technical experts; casino industry leaders; bankers and real estate experts; public safety professionals; socioeconomic experts; environmental groups; residents; business owners; and tourists. In southern Nevada, all roads lead to Yucca Mountain.

The Department of Energy (DOE) plans to ship over a period of nearly 40 years at least 77,000 tons of high-level nuclear waste an average of 2,000 miles across the country through 43 states for storage at Yucca Mountain. Because the DOE has not yet developed a national transportation plan, these are estimates, though the DOE's environmental impact statement indicates a preference for rail routes, which have not been selected.

Every community in the 43 states through which the waste travels will be exposed to the risks involved in nuclear waste transportation. And the enhanced threat of terrorism has added a new dimension to the notion of daily truck or rail trips to Yucca Mountain. What some have called the "largest public works project in the world" inherently comes with a set of unique and complex scientific, technical, social, and political issues.

More than 200 scientific and technical questions remain unanswered, and the "battle of the experts" rages on. While the secretary of energy offers assurances that the scientific research at Yucca Mountain is sound, the Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board found the research "weak to moderate." This wide range of findings does not instill confidence, and leads to the perception that moving forward with the project could be, at best, premature and, at worst,

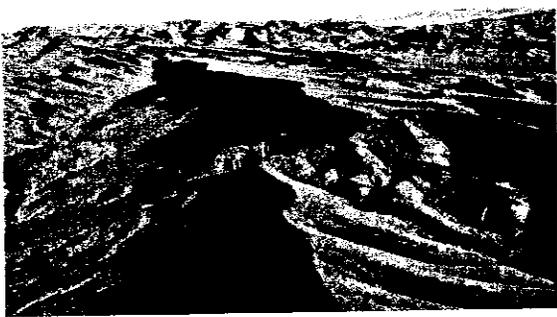
catastrophic. The repository must be found to be safe for a period of at least 10,000 years.

Environmental concerns include air quality, water quality, and the impact on threatened or endangered species. Other concerns range from the health and safety of residents to the effect on business and industry, property values, and public safety preparedness. Beyond the physical and social sciences, political science has been no stranger to this 20-year process. Ever since Nevada leaders dubbed the legislation the "Screw Nevada Bill," issues like states rights, the sovereignty of tribal nations, unfunded mandates, and the federal law itself all have been debated in public forums, in Congress, and in the courts.

As an affected local government unit, Clark County (adjacent to Nye County) receives federal funds for oversight of the Yucca Mountain project. Over the years, the Clark County Department of Comprehensive Planning has convinced the DOE that there could be certain impacts, including a stigmatic effect on property values. The community has convinced the DOE and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to hold further meetings in Nevada to garner more citizen input. And Clark County has influenced federal decision makers to conduct more scientific and technical studies. The NRC now plans to conduct full-scale testing of the transportation casks designed to carry the radioactive waste in order to assure the safety and reliability of the casks, rather than rely only on computer models for those assurances.

While the DOE and NRC both claim that they see no "show stoppers" to keep the project from moving forward, this claim only pertains to the geologic and technical considerations of the mountain itself. It does not take into account any final repository design (which does not yet exist), or any significant flaws and obstacles in the transportation system.

Clark County officials are not convinced that Yucca Mountain is the best answer to the nation's nuclear waste concerns. The U.S. Senate, under intense pressure from the nuclear power industry, overrode the Nevada governor's veto in a vote on July 9. Outside of the DOE and the nuclear industry, most stakeholders believe that too many questions remain unanswered. With the health, safety, and welfare of residents as the primary concern of Clark County, its opposition to this project will continue in the form of litigation and aggressive representation during the NRC licensing process, scheduled to begin in December 2004. ■



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