

Guest column: New Mexico nuclear facility is bad news

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By Judy Treichel

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It may seem like good news in Nevada that an effort is underway in New Mexico to build a private storage facility for nuclear waste there. But don't be mistaken: This facility wouldn't be an alternative to the disastrous Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository. In fact, its existence depends on Yucca Mountain becoming an operating repository. That's unacceptable, because the Nevada facility poses far too many risks for our state.

The license application for the New Mexico facility calls for it to operate over 40 years, after which the waste stored in it would go to Yucca Mountain.

Twelve years ago, the Department of Energy submitted an application for a construction authorization and license to make Yucca Mountain the nation's high-level nuclear waste repository. Two years later, in 2010, the department attempted to withdraw the application. It had determined that the plan was "unworkable" due to the opposition and unending resistance of the people of Nevada, but the court decided that the licensing process should proceed. It did, until funding ran out, and today those deliberations are on an indefinite hold.

Now comes the New Mexico license application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which in the opinion of the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force the commission should not have accepted with the assumption that Yucca Mountain would be an operating repository. We have submitted comments to that effect to the commission.

During all of the time that Nevada has been fighting the Yucca Mountain proposal, we were repeatedly assured that we could place our trust in

the commission because before any license was granted for construction or operation, a thorough and unbiased process would fully play out. We were told there was no reason for questioning the fairness of the commission's licensing process.

Nevadans have been accused of having a NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude about nuclear waste – that we would be pleased if some other place were forced to host a repository instead of us. That is not true. We know that Yucca Mountain is unsuitable and should have been disqualified, and we have respected the democratic right of others to oppose dangers or threats where they live.

Any siting of a facility that creates risk for the community should require informed consent, and the people of New Mexico do not consent.

What we see happening with this so-called interim site is that it does not solve the nuclear waste problem. In fact it increases the risks by putting the waste on the roads and rails, and requiring it to be loaded and unloaded multiple times and transported more than once. Additionally, the only way a site can be considered “interim” is to know that the waste will leave, and the assumption here is that it will leave New Mexico and come to Nevada.

The incentive for the company proposing to build the facility is purely financial – specifically, it's to gain access to the \$42 billion in the federal nuclear waste fund. An interim site does not increase or improve public safety, but rather does just the opposite. It creates one more nuclear waste site and provides more room at reactor sites for more waste. And it moves the waste closer to Nevada.

A national high-level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain is an overwhelmingly unsafe idea. Nevada residents, elected officials and people across the country living near transport routes know it. For 20 years, the Department of Energy studied the site and discovered – or were forced to admit – that there were conditions present that, according to their own guidelines, disqualified the site.

If the licensing process ever restarts, how could we trust the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to fairly judge the science when it has previously

assumed a licensed and operating repository at Yucca Mountain? Congress needs to reverse the action it took naming Yucca Mountain as the only site to be considered for a national repository, and take a fresh and fair look at nuclear waste disposal.

Initiatives like the interim storage site in New Mexico are simply misguided and misleading diversions.

Judy Treichel is executive director of the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force