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A Small West Texas Town Could Be A Dump Site For High-Level Nuclear Waste

The proposed project has split residents of Andrews, but it also has statewide implications.

by LEIF REIGSTAD | FEBRUARY 27, 2017 | 36 COMMENTS



In this June 6, 2013 file photo, crews from Waste Control Specialists load the first of two containers with low-level radioactive waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, into a reinforced 8-inch-thick concrete container at the 90-acre federal dump where it will remain forever, near Andrews, Texas.

AP PHOTO/BETSY BLANEY, FILE



In April last year, Waste Control Specialists—a Dallas-based company focused on the disposal of radioactive waste—**applied** for the federal approval of a project that would bring high-level nuclear waste to its storage site on the outskirts of Andrews, Texas, along the New Mexico border. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission **accepted the application for review** late last month, and the agency's draft could be ready in a year. So high-level nuclear waste could arrive at the Andrews dump site as soon as 2021.

It's an extremely divisive issue in the small West Texas town, which has a population of just under 13,000. At a **public hearing** held by the NRC in Andrews earlier this month, a few dozen people sparred over whether or not the town should allow **potentially**

red-and-yellow radioactive signal. Concerned parents brought their young kids—one child wore a sign around his neck that read, “I want to play in free-radiation zone.” Proponents of the plan, meanwhile, wore green buttons that said “We Support WCS.”

The dump in Andrews is no stranger to controversy. WCS faced [legal threats](#) from environmentalist groups when it first sought to store low-level nuclear waste in Andrews (low-level waste is mostly stuff that comes from medical equipment, like syringes and protective shoe covers, or laboratory animal carcasses, according to the [NRC](#)). The company’s plan was approved by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality in 2009, and the Andrews dump remains [Texas’s only radioactive waste site](#). In 2014, the *New York Times* called the dump “[America’s most valuable hole in the ground](#).”

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But in a [thirty-page legislative report draft](#) completed in 2012, TCEQ staff expressed concerns about WCS’s ability to cover potential liabilities and decommissioning costs, only to see the final version stripped of most of the criticism brought up in the draft, according to the *Texas Observer*. And, also according to the *Observer*, some state geologists and engineers reportedly quit the state agency because their warnings that the facility would likely leak radioactive waste into nearby groundwater consistently fell on deaf ears (in a letter responding to the *Observer*’s 2013 article, WCS’s then-CEO Bill Lindquist disputed that there was any potential for waste to leak into the groundwater, and said WCS provides “the safest environmental alternative for this type of waste available to Texas”).

This time around, the situation is slightly different. The high-level waste WCS wants to dump in Andrews is “highly radioactive and potentially harmful,” [according to the NRC](#). High-level waste is basically spent reactor fuel, and the only way it can become harmless is through decay, which, according to the NRC, can take hundreds of thousands of years. Still, according to the *Odessa American*, the majority of the crowd at the public hearing was in favor of the plan. [Andrews is an oil town](#), and while it [struggled](#) through the recent oil downturn, it managed to weather the storm better than others, in part because the presence of the WCS dump provided a diversification of employers that most towns the size of Andrews don’t have, according to the *Midland Reporter-Telegram*.

Andrews seems hopeful that an economic infusion may be on the horizon. The town recently began construction on a new shopping center. “Any type of retail in Andrews is a plus for us, because being a rural community it’s a little bit of a struggle in order to bring anything into our community,” Interim Economic Development Director Hope Reese recently told [KOSA](#). “I think because jobs are being created and people are coming back to work, and the oil prices have gone up it helps people to spend more money.” WCS Vice President Tom Jones told [KOSA](#) that the high-level nuclear waste project would allow the company to create up to fifty “high-paying” jobs at the Andrews facility.

“We don’t see it as some big, you know, dangerous, terrible, ominous figure,” Julia Wallace, executive director of the Andrews Chamber of Commerce, [told NPR](#). “It’s just another day’s work... This is an industry and area that I think is going to continue to grow, and it’s a need that needs to be met. So I think we’re on to something here.”

It’s a familiar tradeoff: a company brings the promise of jobs and the hope of economic prosperity to a small town that rarely sees such opportunity—along with it, however, comes potential risk. “I don’t want the jobs,” Andrews resident Silvia Ramos said at the public hearing, according to [KWES](#). “It’s a job that’s going to kill someone. Maybe not this year, maybe not next year. What about in five years? Or ten years later?” But according to the *Odessa American*, most of the critics at the public hearing came from out of town or were members of outside environmentalist groups.

Local opposition to the Andrews facility may ultimately be outmatched. WCS appears to have strong ties to Energy Secretary Rick Perry, who [publicly supported](#) bringing nuclear waste to Texas when he was governor. One of Perry’s top political donors was Harold Simmons, who controlled WCS under the umbrella company Valhi. According to the *Austin American-Statesman*, Simmons contributed at least \$1.4 million to Perry in the decade before his death in 2013 (a spokesman for Perry told the *Statesman* in January that Perry has no ties to WCS, and a WCS spokesperson recently denied any suggestion of “crony capitalism” to [Energywire](#)). As the *Texas Observer* notes, the Department of Energy would seem have a direct impact on the kind of high-level nuclear waste WCS seeks, since the agency oversees the dismantling of the nation’s nuclear arsenal and assists in the disposal of nuclear waste produced by power plants and the military.

The high-level waste project in Andrews has statewide implications. According to [NPR](#), the WCS facility would have the capacity to take up to 80 percent of the waste currently being stored at shut-down reactors across the nation, drawing nuclear waste from as far away as Oregon and New York. That means high-level nuclear waste would need to be transported through (or at least nearby) more

commissioners unanimously passed a resolution opposing the shipment of high-level nuclear waste passing through their county on its way to Andrews. "With our history of derailments and lack of infrastructure support, it's not ready for prime time," Precinct 4 Commissioner Tommy Calvert said, according to the *San Antonio Express-News*. "It's just too risky."

It remains unclear how this whole thing will turn out. But with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's review likely at least a year away, the debate in Andrews will almost certainly continue for the foreseeable future.

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EnviroEngineer • 2 months ago

How many mistakes can you find in this picture (or article)?

1. The title. Nobody is considering disposal of High-Level radioactive Waste (HLW) at WCS. The proposal is for storage only!
2. The top-level photograph. This photo shows some waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory (in New Mexico) going into the Federal Waste Disposal Facility at WCS. This IS disposal, but it is Low-Level radioactive Waste (LLW), not HLW. To pair this photo with the headline belies the publication's desire to scare people into thinking that HLW would be disposed like this. That's disingenuous.
3. The text suggests that the waste would be stored "close to ... homes". The Texas population "nearby" is not very near, and at any rate the site is closer to NM residents (6 km) than TX residents. But even in Eunice, the extensive local environmental degradation from the petroleum industry is orders of magnitude worse than anything coming out of WCS, now or in the future.
4. On a sign hung around a kid's neck: "I want to play in free-radiation zone." I guess they had better put the kid in lead box (made with pre-WWII lead), then, because there ain't no radiation-free location on this planet. We all live with radiation, and the proposed facility will add essentially nothing to what is around us all now. Definitely do NOT take that kid to the Rocky Mountains!
5. "...the Andrews dump remains Texas's only radioactive waste site." Not so. Just down the road, in fact, is the Lotus facility, where NORM and TENORM are quietly pumped into a huge underground chamber solution-mined from salt.

So, let's eschew the hyperbole and talk about facts, shall we?

2 ^ | ▾ • Share ▶



CharlesHouston → EnviroEngineer • 2 months ago

The kid should also NOT take a long distance airplane flight since those expose you to radiation.

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no one in the future will get a higher dose than a frequent flyer does today. 0.25 mSv is about equal to 25,000 miles in the air.

1 ^ | v · Share >



bettyspinks → EnviroEngineer · 18 days ago

Dump. Storage. Tomato tomahto.

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EnviroEngineer → bettyspinks · 16 days ago

Well, no. A dump implies disposal, in that it is a permanent resting place. Storage means temporary, in that it will eventually move on to somewhere else. In fact, by law, spent nuclear fuel cannot be disposed near the ground surface, so storage means just that -- temporary storage. So, by law, the stuff cannot sit at the storage site forever.

The follow-on step, then, is to open a disposal site. That's a whole other kettle of fish. Perhaps you could help to see that come to pass -- somewhere else.

2 ^ | v · Share >



Fred Fredrickson → EnviroEngineer · 23 days ago

You have been duped. Once they bring this junk in, you'll never get rid of it. But it will surely get rid of you - eventually, especially with the increasing intensity and frequency of frack quakes all around West Texas and with every drilling company in the world coming to West Texas. Bye bye, we will miss you, you brought it on yourselves.

^ | v · Share >



EnviroEngineer → Fred Fredrickson · 16 days ago

1. Ain't no one duping me.
2. Spent nuclear fuel cannot -- by law -- be allowed to remain near the ground surface. It has to go to a geologic repository. So, yes, they will get rid of it.
3. Are you dissing the people of West Texas? I don't. I also do not live there.

2 ^ | v · Share >



Becky Spears Duda · 2 months ago

This makes me so mad!!! The so called plant is over 25 miles from Andrews, TX. This is going to be built in my little town of Eunice, NM back yard. Less than 6 miles from our town on the Texas border. We had no say so or vote. Very disturbing!

1 ^ | v · Share >



EnviroEngineer → Becky Spears Duda · 13 days ago

As the nearest residents to the WCS site, you indeed should have a voice. The state border should be as irrelevant to politics as it is to the environment.

1 ^ | v · Share >



CharlesHouston → Becky Spears Duda · 2 months ago

Actually as a resident of Eunice you should be happy that it is described as Andrews. The only repercussion would be the public fear and if they thought it was Andrews you are off the hook. You are even in a different State and so would be assumed to be safe. The storage is very safe - the public perception is the whole debate.

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Jon → Becky Spears Duda · 2 months ago

Eunice and Lea County's elected officials a decade ago seemed to decide if they had no say in what Andrews County was doing (and were getting no money out of the Waste Control Specialists project, other than workers making the short drive west to eat or buy other items), they might as well get in on it themselves, which is why they approved the URENCO uranium enrichment plant that's literally right across the street from the WCS site.

It doesn't necessarily make either one of them good or bad, but even if WCS's permit was denied and the plant went away tomorrow, Eunice would still have radioactive materials in the area.

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EnviroEngineer → Jon · 2 months ago

In fact, even if URENCO and WCS went away or were never there to begin with, Eunice and its surrounding area would have radioactive materials to contend with. The petroleum industry produces its share of radioactive waste, and it is less stringently regulated than either URENCO or WCS. Not to mention the odors! :)



I agree w you on this. Im an Andrews resident and against it. Guess since its going to be placed it Tx. Other states get no say so or vote. Again thats our great gov.

^ | v · Share ›



Fred Fredrickson → Becky Spears Duda · 23 days ago

That's the way corporations work today. They buy off the government and screw everyone else. Stop voting for Republicans, who are much worse by far.

^ | v · Share ›



CharlesHouston · 2 months ago

This issue generates a LOT of fear, the concerns of people should be addressed. One concern is that the production of farmers and ranchers in the area will be shunned - due to fears about contamination. There is a lot of hysteria due to years of inaccurate movies, etc etc.

There have been significant accidents - the only sort of recent ones were due to tremendous irresponsible actions of the operators. The Chernobyl accident is the best example, the operators (many of whom died due to their actions) were terribly irresponsible and caused the accident. There has never been an accident caused for reasons anything like that in the West.

People now worry about Fukushima - a significant accident where no one was injured or killed. No one mentions the fact that thousands of people were killed by the tsunami - but no one advocates moving people inland, away from the ocean.

People worry due to the Three Mile Island accident - it was significant but no one was injured or killed. There was some evacuation just to be very very careful, but there was never a significant release of radioactivity. None.

Energy production is risky - many many many people have been killed in coal mine cave ins. Many many many people have been killed in fires due to trucks crashing and spilling gasoline.

The storage planned at this facility is extremely safe, the current "waste" is slightly radioactive clothes, tools, etc. High level waste is not attractive to "terrorists" or anyone, they have a tough time just getting the stuff. And it is not very useable as a weapon - it cannot be made to explode.

People are afraid of things that they do not understand - they understand accidents due to ranching and they accept them. They understand the slaughter on our highways every year and they accept them.

The waste at Andrews will almost certainly NEVER cause a problem - in the meantime people will accept the far greater toll of car crashes, ranching accidents, gun accidents, etc.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



Fred Fredrickson → CharlesHouston · 23 days ago

Wait until a frack quake breaks apart all of the high level nuclear waste containers in Andrews, TX and kills everyone in West Texas. Then maybe people will stop voting for Republican jerks who want to dismantle the EPA.

<http://www.earthquakewsto...>

^ | v · Share ›



EnviroEngineer → Fred Fredrickson · 14 days ago

This is an example of the irrational fear that CharlesHouston is talking about. The scenario you describe simply cannot happen. And the only political aspect is that while most of us Democrats and Liberals are ostensibly concerned about the environment, ironically many are knee-jerk anti-nuclear. That means that people have not looked at the facts objectively.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



CharlesHouston → Fred Fredrickson · 23 days ago

Fred - as a guy who lived in San Angelo, Texas (deep in West Texas) for a long time... That ground is very very stable, your fantasy of containers breaking open is very silly. The ground is dirt - and does not split open like on a movie. The containers can shift around in this dirt and it would take a direct impact to break any apart and release the contents.

Your ridiculous assertions (killing everyone in West Texas) make the objections of the anti-storage folks seem silly. You are claiming something would happen that would rival an explosion - which is not possible and even you would admit that.

I have often voted Republican and I am totally supportive of the EPA.

^ | v · Share ›



EnviroEngineer → CharlesHouston · 15 days ago

supportive of the EPA. :)

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Fred Fredrickson → Fred Fredrickson · 23 days ago

CharlesHouston, you remind me of the foolish man who built his house on the sand and then the rains came That guy got off lucky. You will die. When you get cancer, you'll wish you'd have died faster.

^ | v · Share >



EnviroEngineer → Fred Fredrickson · 15 days ago

Indeed we will all die. It's a fact of life.

Perhaps if you get cancer, you will choose to avail yourself of some of the many diagnostic and treatment techniques that are available through... nuclear medicine. Imagine that. And the radioactive waste from your diagnosis and treatment will need to go to a radioactive waste repository. Hopefully, one will still be open when you need it.

1 ^ | v · Share >



CharlesHouston → Fred Fredrickson · 16 days ago

As I pointed out - you are far far far more likely to die in a car crash, no one wants to ban cars. You are far far far more likely to die in a gun accident - of course we ban only a very few types of automatic weapons. Refining causes explosions (as we have here in Houston, Texas) and no one says we should shut down refineries. Coal mines collapse and yet the government is working to expand coal mining. People are content with the slaughter of society but they are afraid of "radiation" in spite of the fact that they are exposed daily. Many people do not understand their world and they are afraid - it is easy to find a scapegoat.

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This comment is awaiting moderation. Show comment.



EnviroEngineer → RJ · 2 months ago

But this article is about the storage of spent (used) nuclear fuel, not its disposal. And it is not about low-level waste. But you ask a good question: Why should Texas provide radioactive waste disposal "cover" for all these other slacker states that did not meet their obligations to provide for themselves some sort of LLW disposal facility. I don't have a good answer for that, except that the facilities at WCS are the best that anyone has come up with outside of the Nevada National Security Site (formerly Nevada Test Site). Since it is so safe, and even ignoring the money bit, why not allow TX to make this world-class resource available to all comers? And don't worry, Andrews is getting their cut.

Also, @RJ, there are three other commercial LLW disposal sites around the US, so Texas is not bearing the entire burden.

1 ^ | v · Share >



Fred Fredrickson · 23 days ago

Just wait until a frack quake breaks apart all of the high level nuclear waste containers in Andrews, TX and kills everyone in West Texas. Then maybe people will stop voting for Republican jerks who want to dismantle the EPA.

<http://www.earthquakewsto...>

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EnviroEngineer → Fred Fredrickson · 13 days ago

These minor quakes will not impair the integrity of the storage containers. No worries there.

1 ^ | v · Share >



St. Anger · 2 months ago

i guess the rest of us should be glad there is a whole town of suckers out there who will trade their children's safety for some \$\$.

but i'd still be happier if no one was willing to store the stuff, thereby creating a disincentive to make more of it.

^ | v · Share >



EnviroEngineer → St. Anger · 2 months ago

But it does not work that way. And do you see how your "suckers" comment could be offensive to the local folks?

or its production, like coal. There are whole states or "suckers" that have bought into the dream of coal and thousands of unwitting people ("suckers"?) have paid the price in terms of catastrophic mine failures, lung diseases like emphysema, black lung, and asthma, and environmental degradation due to uncontrolled release of radionuclides, heavy metals, and nitrogen and sulfur oxides into the atmosphere.

Solar and wind are fine, but they do not keep up the base load that Americans have come to expect. There ain't no magic genie to make electricity without consequences. Which consequences do you prefer?

3 ^ | v · Share ›



St. Anger → EnviroEngineer · 2 months ago

straw men and false dichotomies, all the way down. congrats on the up votes, tho.

and yes, it occurs to me that people could be offended by me calling them "suckers." just as i am offended by their *being* suckers.

^ | v · Share ›



EnviroEngineer → St. Anger · 2 months ago

Please explain what you mean by "straw men" and "false dichotomies". I'm interested to better understand your point of view, here, because I'm sure that at some level we have shared values. For example, are we both concerned about the future of humanity, and what problem increased CO2 levels in the atmosphere will bring? Are we both concerned about human and environmental health and safety? Are we both concerned about death caused by industry? If so, we have common ground.

We do have choices when it comes to the production of electricity. But practically speaking, we don't really have the choice to not have electricity. If we consider electric power to be necessary (perhaps a necessary evil, but it does have its benefits, and I'm sure we both take advantage of them--do you use air conditioning or lights in your home after dark?) then how do we best produce it? I am open to new ideas. We certainly need some.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



St. Anger → EnviroEngineer · 2 months ago

your response appears very thoughtful, which i read is the new conservative social media strategy. (but appearances are deceiving, which is i gather the point. if you were truly thinking openly about this, you would not need me to point out the below.)

here is one false dichotomy: we have to choose between not enough electricity or nuclear power.

this is actually false in several ways, which i am confident you will ask me to elaborate in repeated, incremental, and excruciatingly polite replies. but i will simply point out two things: (1) solar power installation coasts have dropped by 30-50% just since 2010. this trend will continue. and (2) texas wind farms produce so much energy they don't have enough transmission capacity to actually move the power to where it is needed.

so obviously we have more than the two (false) choices you are presenting. investing in either of the above, just for starters.

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EnviroEngineer → St. Anger · 2 months ago

Indeed appearances must be deceiving, if not intentionally, since I am in neither a conservative (I am politically somewhere left of Dennis Kucinich) nor do I participate in the bulk of social media (this type of forum being an exception, since we get more than 140 characters - ha ha). Heck, I don't even have a Facebook acct. Anyway, please do not think that I am not a proponent of solar and wind. I support investment in those technologies, and in fact have personally done so with the addition of solar panels on my own house. You are presuming my motives, which is unfair.

And is not being "excruciatingly polite" (I love that!) a refreshing change in these days of Internet diatribes and nastiness? I appreciate your civility.

If we want electricity, round the clock, we must produce it on the spot (our current power paradigm, which requires power plants that generate round the clock) or storage. For Texas, solar and wind are great sources. Perhaps we can work on energy storage for those... I fully support that. Compressed air, molten salt, giant batteries -- let's see what can be done! I believe that storage as well as improved transmission will go a long way towards bringing us round the clock power. I see nuclear as a necessary bridge to something else -- not a permanent solution. Fossil fuels are a far

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CharlesHouston → St. Anger · 2 months ago

So we will expect that you will decline x-rays, for in case you break a bone. You will decline many types of cancer treatment - radiation, diagnostic isotope injections, etc. People demand the benefits of nuclear medicine while refusing to store the waste generated.

^ | v · Share ›



St. Anger → CharlesHouston · 2 months ago

look again. that is exactly what the article is *not* about.

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EnviroEngineer → St. Anger · 2 months ago

Fair enough. The article is not about low-level waste disposal. (That's a whole 'nother discussion.) It is about spent nuclear fuel storage. So, let's modify Charles' second sentence to read, "People demand the benefits of [electricity] while refusing to [manage] the waste generated." That brings it back to the topic, and refocuses on the real problem:

As a society, we are hypocritical in our demands and our responsibilities. We demand that our government and utilities provide us constant, uninterrupted stable electrical power. Not to mention clean water and garbage collection and management. These are a difficult civil engineering problem, and most of the world never gets to enjoy that level of service. And yet, as a society, we also demand that our wastes be managed. That's fine, and there are folks who devote their careers to managing wastes (believe it or not, some of us enjoy the challenge!). Why the push-back? Do you yell at the person who picks up your garbage that s/he should not do that, because it is nasty? Of course not -- you thank that person for his or her service, just like you thank the person who runs your sewage treatment plant so that you don't have to manage your own sewage. Do you tell these people how they should be doing their jobs? Go to the sewage treatment plant and tell them that they should do a better job, and keep down on those odors, by the way. See how that works for you.

Radioactive waste is no different, really. It must be managed, irrespective of whether you approve of its generation -- it exists. Why not let the radioactive waste management people do their jobs? They are not evil -- they are trying to help solve a problem. And if the folks in Andrews County want to offer help, then kudos to them. They are not suckers--they are helping to provide solutions. You might ask yourself during an introspective moment what you are doing to help.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



CharlesHouston → St. Anger · 2 months ago

The article has a LOT in there about how low level waste was resisted - that is largely due to nuclear medicine, x-rays, etc etc. There is now controversy about high level waste as well - this is equally not a real problem. There is no way that winds could spread radioactivity, it will all be sealed in concrete that buried. Etc etc.

So if you or your family break a bone, please decline a x-ray. It helps generate that low level waste that you feel no one should be willing to store.

^ | v · Share ›



EnviroEngineer → CharlesHouston · 2 months ago

Just to be clear, x-rays machines do not produce radioactive waste. They are on or off -- that's it. But -- point taken with respect to nuclear medicine, which does contribute to the radioactive waste stream. Maybe a better example would be, "If you get thyroid cancer, be sure not to use nuclear medicine in its diagnosis and treatment, lest you contribute to radioactive waste. Good luck with surgery on that tricky thyroid!"

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