

SOUTH CAROLINA SEPTEMBER 27, 2016 7:50 AM

Plan surfaces for new nuclear disposal ground in SC



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COLUMBIA, SC — A plan has surfaced to establish another nuclear waste disposal ground in South Carolina, a state with a history of taking atomic refuse from across the country.

An organization called the Spent Fuel Reprocessing Group wants federal approval to open a disposal area near Barnwell and the Savannah River Site nuclear weapons complex. Spent fuel, a type of highly radioactive waste, would be moved from the state’s four nuclear power plant sites and stored indefinitely at the new facility, records show.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission in July received notice of the plan. The proposal is a long way from becoming reality, but if eventually approved by the federal government, it would create a place for nuclear waste disposal that is likely to draw opposition.

Several environmental groups said this week they are preparing to fight any effort to create what they called an atomic waste dumping ground. Politicians, including Gov. Nikki Haley, also expressed reservations Monday.

The subject of nuclear waste disposal is a touchy one in South Carolina because many people say the state has shouldered more than its share of the nuclear waste burden.

South Carolina already stores highly radioactive material from around the country and world at the Savannah River Site. It also has a low-level waste dump in Barnwell County that was used for decades to bury nuclear garbage from power plants across the country. That site has leaked radioactive tritium into groundwater.

Now, the government is being asked to allow an interim disposal site for high-level nuclear waste from power plants in South Carolina. The site would be near the Barnwell low-level waste dump, environmentalists said Monday. The site would be considered an interim disposal ground that would hold the nuclear waste while the government figures out what to do with it in the long run.

“I’d like to learn more, but I’m sure there will be considerable concern,” state Rep. James Smith, D-Richland, said.

Contacted Monday, Haley’s office said: “South Carolina will not become a permanent dumping ground for nuclear waste regardless of where it would be housed or who would house it.”

Supporters of the disposal site plan could not be reached Monday. But records show enthusiastic support from the Spent Fuel Reprocessing Group.

A letter the group sent to the NRC said the disposal ground is needed to help power companies get rid of nuclear waste, which is created in the generation of electricity.

Duke Energy, which operates three of the four commercial nuclear plant sites in South Carolina, was not aware of the plan and declined comment. Attempts to reach SCE&G, which is building two new nuclear reactors at its Fairfield County power plant, were unsuccessful.

Mike Stake, a former president of the Aiken County Tea Party, submitted the proposal listing himself as president of the Spent Fuel Reprocessing Group. He was not available Monday for comment.

In his proposal, dated July 26, Stake said the group would formally apply to the commission “at a later date” to “acquire or build a storage facility” near the Savannah River site and Barnwell. The letter states “the need to consolidate (spent nuclear fuel) for economy and security and to lessen the burden on operating nuclear power plants in South Carolina.”

According to the plan, the material would be stored on an interim basis and could eventually be recycled for use in nuclear reactors.

Efforts to recycle, or reprocess spent fuel, have never taken off in the United States because the idea is so controversial. Reprocessing can create a waste stream that adds to the nation's burden of atomic garbage, but boosters say reprocessing used nuclear fuel can be done safely and effectively.

“Though the spent fuel storage proposal is in its formative stages, we believe that it is totally unnecessary and potentially poses a host of environmental and health issues,” said Chris Hall, chair of executive committee of the South Carolina Chapter of the Sierra Club.

A spokeswoman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said the agency has never had any interaction with Stake or the group prior to receiving the July letter. Once an application is received, the commission could take three years or more to come to a decision, spokeswoman Maureen Conley said.

In addition to the commission review, the application could be required to undergo a public hearing process conducted by the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board.

Critics say developing an interim storage site is risky and could eventually mean South Carolina could be saddled with the material forever.

Environmentalists say there is no need to move spent nuclear fuel off of atomic power plant sites. They contend it can be stored safely. Transporting it to a disposal area near Barnwell would increase risks to the public, they said. If a permanent disposal site were eventually developed nationally, the material would have to be transported again from the interim South Carolina site, according to Savannah River Site Watch, the S.C. League of Women Voters and the state Sierra Club.

“Packaging of the spent fuel for transport, unloading it at the consolidated storage site and eventually repackaging it to transport to a federal facility would unnecessarily pose a high economic cost and a logistical nightmare, both of which can be avoided if the spent fuel is left where it is now stored until such time as a geologic facility is available,” according to the groups.

What to do with the nation's used nuclear fuel has been problematic. The government spent billions of dollars developing a permanent burial ground in Nevada, but nixed the idea after President Obama took office. Since the Yucca Mountain plan was abandoned, nuclear power plants have had to store spent nuclear fuel on-site. Initially the fuel is kept in pools until it cools off. Then it is put into dry casks at the sites.

Utilities have for years expressed frustration the Yucca Mountain site is no longer an option, saying the federal government went back on a commitment to take the spent fuel off their hands.

U.S. Rep. Mick Mulvaney, R-S.C., has proposed legislation in Congress that would make it easier for utilities to ship used nuclear fuel to an interim storage site until a permanent site to replace Yucca Mountain is found. Interim sites have been discussed in Texas and New Mexico.



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Jeannie Presler · Vancouver, Washington

No one should be proposing that Congress make it easier for utilities to ship used nuclear fuel to an interim storage site until a permanent site is found. So sorry that South Carolina has also been chosen to store nuclear waste.

There is a taxpayer lack of trust in U.S. Department of Energy, members of Congress, the Senate Appropriations Committee, and its agencies ability to perform national nuclear related processing and cleanup measures. Lack of trust, that lifelong cleaning up of our nuclear waste, and chemically poisoned Hanford WA USA will ever be completed on the banks of the Columbia River, or superfund cleanup of Idaho National Laboratory's 308 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel shipped from all over and stored near Idaho Falls, Idaho.

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Terri Lynn Struth · Works at South Carolina Dept. of Disabilities and Special Needs

“South Carolina already stores highly radioactive material from around the country and world at the Savannah River Site. It also has a low level waste dump in Barnwell County that was used for decades to bury nuclear garbage from power plants across the country. That site has leaked radioactive tritium into the groundwater.” . . .

Two words → “Erin Brockovich”

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