

Plan to bury uranium in Utah scrutinized as decision nears

May 11 2015, byMichelle L. Price

In a barren landscape of scrub just off a major Utah highway, a 10-foot-deep pit the size of about 75 football fields could soon house a kind of nuclear waste that grows more radioactive for 2 million years.

EnergySolutions' plan to bring up to 700,000 metric tons of depleted uranium to Utah from a federal stockpile has been on hold through six years of legal and political wrangling. But state regulators are expected to make a decision this year about whether to let it move forward.

The issue comes as many states wrestle with how and where to store waste from the nation's nuclear industry, including used nuclear fuel and radioactive waste. In Nevada, for example, officials have fought for years to prevent nuclear waste from being stored 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas at the proposed Yucca Mountain site.

In New Mexico, a federal facility for low-level nuclear waste is closed after a drum in a federal repository was breached and radiation escaped. Officials are working to build a temporary storage facility.

In Utah, the state Department of Environmental Quality says public comment will play a big role in its decision on the proposed storage site 80 miles west of Salt Lake City, just off Interstate 80. They also will consider how the uninhabited industrial site will weather changes in development, erosion and large-scale geologic changes, including another ice age.

EnergySolutions spokesman Mark Walker said the Salt Lake City-based company is confident it can address any concerns and is committed to a transparent process.

"We want people to fully understand what we're doing," Walker said.

Regulators recently held open houses in Salt Lake City and Tooele to answer residents' questions, but most of the several dozen people who attended were with EnergySolutions, the state and environmental groups.

Officials hope more people will turn out to hearings later this year.

Jewel Allen, a Grantsville resident and one of a handful of locals at a Wednesday meeting in Tooele, said some might not worry about what happens thousands of years from now, but Utah still needs to be careful.

"We can't just assume that because it's somebody else's generation, that it's their problem," she said.

Still, Allen said she's more concerned about a proposal to rebuild a state prison near her town than the burial of depleted uranium 50 miles away.

Stockton chemist Matt McCarty said besides potential environmental threats, he worries about the facility's accessibility and if there will be enough warning signs years from now about what's buried there.

"We're talking about a hazard that's going to exist for a million years," McCarty said.

Besides worries about the uncertainties of a storage plan for what scientist call "deep time," environmental groups say depleted uranium should be reclassified as a hotter type of hazardous waste that's illegal in the state.

Republican Gov. Gary Herbert echoed that concern last month, saying he suspects it should be reclassified, and if it is, it shouldn't be in Utah.

Depleted uranium, left over from the enrichment process used to make nuclear weapons and generate nuclear energy, grows hotter over a long period because other toxic materials it produces when it decays also emit radiation. Eventually, after billions of years, the decay process ends and what's left is a stable form of lead.

If state regulators approve, the depleted uranium would be stored at a square-mile site tucked just west of the Cedar Mountains. Its neighbors include three hazardous waste storage, treatment and incineration facilities and 4,000 acres of military grounds for testing chemicals, weapons and aircraft. The site is about 20 miles from the nearest home and 50 miles from the nearest town.

The uranium would be stored in 12-by-4-foot steel containers or 55-gallon drums covered by a large mound of specialized grout, clay, rock and vegetation.

"It's responsibly managing the material in a location where it will never be an issue for anyone again," said Walker, the company spokesman.

Modern record-keeping and plans for the federal government to take over the site after 100 years will ensure it is properly managed, Walker said.

The company is expected to answer regulators' concerns by late summer, and Walker is confident it will satisfy them. After that, the public has 45 days to comment before Utah officials make a decision.

If regulators approve the plan, EnergySolutions would negotiate a deal with the U.S. Energy Department to take the material by rail from

Kentucky and Ohio.

Walker said the company expects the government will split the depleted uranium between Utah and another company's site in Texas, giving EnergySolutions a \$100 million to \$150 million contract over 10 years.

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