

Storage plan for spent fuel adds to US nuclear debate

May 1 2018, by Susan Montoya Bryan

A plan to temporarily store tons of spent fuel from U.S. commercial nuclear reactors in New Mexico is drawing fire from critics who say the federal government needs to consider more alternatives.

Dozens of people packed a meeting Monday in Roswell as regulators took comments on the proposal by Holtec International to construct a below-ground space that could house about 100,000 metric tons of used fuel.

Ranchers and dairy operators suggested the plan could affect agriculture and oil and gas—stalwarts of the southeastern New Mexico economy.

Supporters say the project could provide another economic boost to the region, already home to the [federal government](#)'s only underground repository for Cold War-era [waste](#) generated by decades of bomb-making and nuclear research.

The meeting comes just days after a congressional subcommittee reviewed a proposed budget for the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission that was centered partly on the decadeslong stalemate over what to do with the nation's nuclear waste.

Holtec is seeking an initial 40-year license, but critics that include members of New Mexico's congressional delegation have concerns that the federal government has no plans for permanent disposal and the waste could end up marooned in the state indefinitely.

Don Hancock with the Southwest Research and Information Center, an Albuquerque-based watchdog group, said federal regulators need to consider improving storage capabilities where the fuel is already being kept. Hancock and others have raised questions about transporting the waste across the country.

At Monday's public meeting, which was the first of three planned this week in New Mexico, dairy owner Al Squire said any contamination of the air or drinking water could disrupt the ability to market his products.

"An entire industry could be destroyed in the midst of widespread consumer panic that would most certainly follow such an accident," Squire said in a statement.

Holtec officials have argued that the project would be safe and address growing demand.

The storage facility would be located in a remote area on 1,000 acres between the cities of Carlsbad and Hobbs.

The latest budget request by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission includes more than \$47 million for a long-stalled [nuclear waste repository](#) at Nevada's Yucca Mountain, 100 miles (161 kilometers) from Las Vegas. That state's Republican governor and lawmakers from both parties oppose the plan.

U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican who chairs a subcommittee on energy and water development, said at a hearing last week that Yucca Mountain should be part of the solution to address the waste problem and that the nuclear commission's scientists have said waste can be safely stored there.

"But even if we had Yucca Mountain open today, we would still need to

look for another permanent repository," Alexander said. "We have more than enough used fuel to fill Yucca Mountain to its legal capacity."

The quickest and likely least expensive way to meet government obligations is to contract with a private storage facility, Alexander said.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat, said about 3,000 metric tons of highly radioactive rods are stored close to the ocean and population centers in her state alone. She acknowledged that efforts to move the waste away from reactor sites have been hamstrung in part by the politics surrounding Yucca Mountain.

Republican U.S. Sen. Dean Heller of Nevada said in a letter to Feinstein and Alexander that Yucca Mountain poses risks that must be addressed.

"To date, however, Nevadans have not received any assurances from the NRC that their concerns will receive the process and consideration they are due under existing law," he wrote.

New Mexico's Democratic senators—Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich—have asked for more public meetings on the Holtec proposal. They say residents outside southeastern New Mexico should have a say.

The commission is accepting online comments through May 29.

The proposal has the support of Republican Gov. Susana Martinez as well as cities and counties in the region.

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