

REBUTTAL TO CHICAGO TRIBUNE: Revive Yucca Mountain: Illinois has more nuclear waste than any other state, all of it in temporary storage, Chicago Tribune, April 12, 2017

To the Editors of the Chicago Tribune:

The recent *Tribune* editorial demanding quick action to reactivate the flawed Yucca Mt. Nevada site to serve as the nation's permanent disposal repository for high-level radioactive wastes (HLRW) illustrates the difference between naïve, seemingly well-intended but ill-informed wishes, and the complex hard facts surrounding HLRW storage and disposal.

While it is laudable and ultimately necessary to move HLRW from reactors and into a permanent, deep geological disposal repository as quickly as possible, moving it to a flawed site destined to leak, or to unnecessary temporary storage sites away from reactors is simply irresponsible management, environmentally threatening, and prohibitively costly compared to existing, viable alternatives. The only beneficiaries are the nuclear utilities, who wish to make more of the wastes and who are getting a little "constipated."

As for "jury-rigged" systems, the editors totally ignore the history of Yucca Mt.'s selection: it was picked by politics first, then subsequently "characterized" afterwards, turning the notion of science completely on its head. Eight other sites were to have been investigated, but were removed from consideration by politics and a Congress that actually *prohibited* the DOE from examining other sites.

The editors erroneously conclude that Yucca's remoteness in the Mojave Desert means that no one lives there, or the land is not used. They incorrectly state that "many people in Nevada didn't want the waste," when in fact it was a *majority* of Nevadans. They derisively label Nevada's opposition to Yucca Mt. as "NIMBY-ism;" yet the people of Nevada derived no benefit from nuclear power and the creation of HLRW, but are being asked – maybe forced – to accept the liabilities. People in other states got the benefits from nuclear, but now don't want THEIR BACKYARDS sullied by HLRW, and so demand that folks elsewhere take the risks. Who is the real NIMBY here?

The editors place selectively misguided and undeserved confidence in the performance and conclusions of federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), an agency referred to by Washington Congressional staffers as a lapdog agency, captive of the industry it is charged to regulate.

The editor's cherry-picked conclusion of the NRC's report on Yucca Mt. – that it is "capable of safely isolating used nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste for the 1-million-year period specified in the regulations" – must be examined juxtaposed to another 2014 NRC conclusion that stated, "spent fuel generated in any reactor can be stored safely and without significant environmental impacts for at least 60 years beyond the licensed life for operation of that reactor," either in the spent fuel pools or in "dry casks." The latter conclusion indicates that there is no urgent or compelling environmental reason to build a repository at the flawed Yucca Mt. site.

Who says that the Yucca site is flawed? Well among *many* others, Alison Macfarlane, a trained geologist and former Chair of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, whose presentation about Yucca Mt. at the 2008 Deane Conference at Lake Forest College indicated that Yucca Mt. failed two of four international IAEA siting criteria for the safe isolation of HLRW.

Recall – we do not have Starship Enterprise transporter technology. While it is tempting to urge quick removal of HLRW out of Zion, the reality is that prematurely placing 1,000 tons of high-level radioactive wastes on our crumbling roads and rails, and possibly our fresh waterways without *first* preparing and greatly improving that infrastructure would be more dangerous and irresponsible. If these wastes represent a hazard sitting still at Zion, they represent an even greater hazard at 40-60 mph on our roads and rails, as the recent March 15th derailment of rail cars carrying molten sulfur in Lake Forest amply demonstrate. Further, a March 9, 2017 report by The American Society of Civil Engineers gives Illinois “D” and “D-“ ratings for its roads and transit lines, respectively – and that’s higher than the national average!

So – what should be done now? NEIS recommends that since the radioactive wastes represent a clear hazard, and there is no place to responsibly send the HLRW to for the foreseeable future, local communities that have become *de facto* HLRW dumps should be given maximum interim protection by storing the HLRW in enhanced “hardened onsite storage” (HOSS) facilities onsite at the reactor sites, and that these communities receive compensation for the economic damage that being an unwilling *de facto* HLRW dump has done to their communities. This buys time to conduct a responsible and science-based investigation to identify a safe and appropriate final disposal facility.

We’re only going to get one chance to get selecting a safe site right. The nation needs an excellent HLRW disposal RE-pository, not a flawed SUP-pository that benefits only the nuclear industry. Impulsively selecting a Yucca Mt. site destined to fail is the wrong choice. Now, THAT’S what we call “*REALLY* screwed!”

--793 words—

NEIS was founded in 1981 to provide the public with credible information on nuclear power, waste, and radiation hazards; and information about the viable energy alternatives to nuclear power. NEIS staff have served previously on the IL Dept. of Nuclear Safety's Citizen Advisory Group on Low-Level Radioactive Waste; and as invited presenters to both President Obama's 2011 Blue Ribbon Commission on the Future of Nuclear Power; and in 2016 at the U.S. DOE's scoping process for the Consent Based Siting of Radioactive Wastes in Chicago, IL.

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CHICAGO TRIBUNE EDITORIAL:

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Revive Yucca Mountain: Illinois has more nuclear waste than any other state, all of it in temporary storage

The Yucca Mountain nuclear waste storage facility in Nevada is back in the news with President Donald Trump's budget proposal including \$120 million to revive the project. (Isaac Brekken / AP 2006)

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It has been 30 years since Congress designated Nevada's Yucca Mountain as the secure site for the nation's nuclear waste. Since then, taxpayers have coughed up \$11 billion creating a repository 1,000 feet underground that would keep the radioactive refuse permanently sealed off. As yet, it's still empty. But that could finally change.

Yucca Mountain is in a remote section of the Mojave Desert. But many people in Nevada didn't want the waste, no matter how safe or isolated the storage facility may be. It was the ultimate NIMBY project. One of those opponents, alas, was [Harry Reid](#), who for 10 years was Senate Democratic leader and in a position to get his way. As president, [Barack Obama](#) gave Reid exactly what he wanted, closing down the entire effort.

Obama's capitulation defied scientific evidence as well as common sense. A study released by the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#) in 2014 concluded that the design met all of the agency's requirements. The "proposed repository as designed will be capable of safely isolating used nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste for the 1-million-year period specified in the regulations," the NRC said. That's right: 1 million years.

But the technical merits of the facility were, regrettably, beside the point. In 2011, the nonpartisan federal Government Accountability Office found that the Obama administration's "decision to terminate the Yucca Mountain repository was made for policy reasons, not technical or safety reasons."

Now that decision stands to be reversed, as it should be. Energy Secretary Rick Perry toured the facility in March, and President [Donald Trump](#)'s budget plan includes \$120 million to revive the project. With Reid finally retired and Republicans in control of Congress, now is the time to get it done.

The 79,000 tons of existing nuclear waste, after all, have to be stashed somewhere. Right now, that somewhere consists of dozens of sites across the country, including the mothballed plant in Zion. Illinois has more of the spent fuel than any other state — including 1,000 tons at Zion, on the shore of Lake Michigan.

These facilities are much less secure and permanent than Yucca Mountain is designed to be. And instead of confining the material to one tiny portion of one state, they leave it scattered over 34 states, with each site requiring constant expense and vigilance.

This haphazard approach makes no sense from the standpoint of safety or security. On the contrary, it creates unnecessary risk of environmental disasters and terrorist attacks — unlike the formidably impregnable Yucca Mountain. It has also wasted huge sums of money, because the federal government has had to pay those utilities that have been forced to store the spent fuel — a tab expected to approach \$25 billion. And it stands in the way of expanding nuclear power, which ought to be a priority today as a method of generating electricity without producing greenhouse gases.

Local opponents referred to the 1987 measure designating Yucca Mountain for the nation's nuclear waste as "The Screw Nevada Act." In fact, the danger to the state was pure fantasy, and the economic benefits were real.

Yucca Mountain is the only viable alternative to the jury-rigged status quo. We hope the Trump administration and Congress will revive it. Because if they don't, we're all screwed.