

WARD VALLEY WASTE SITE POISED TO GET GREEN LIGHT

LAST MONTH, SECRETARY OF THE Interior Bruce Babbitt announced that he will move forward with the transfer of government land to the State of California for the building of a low-level nuclear waste site at Ward Valley. Babbitt's decision is based on a report issued in May by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) which gave a ringing endorsement to the proposed low-level radioactive waste site in California's eastern Mojave Desert. "I believe the Academy report provides a qualified clean bill of health in relation to concerns about the site, and an additional measure of confidence that the land transfer

is in the public interest," he said.

Theoretically, the land transfer could take place within two months once some minor issues are resolved with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Fish and Wildlife Service. After the transfer, construction could begin on the site immediately since California has already issued a license for the facility to be built by the company, U.S. Ecology. In the world of the federal government, however, things never seem to happen that smoothly. A few days before presstime, Babbitt and California Governor Pete Wilson had begun a political wrangle over the conditions of the land transfer.

THE STATUS OF LOW-LEVEL WASTE SITES

Compacts/States	Siting	License*	Facility Open*
Appalachian <i>host: Pennsylvania</i>	Siting process under way	Application to be submitted early 1997	Mid-1999
Central <i>host: Nebraska</i>	Site selected	Application submitted	Autumn 1999
Central Midwest <i>host: Illinois</i>	Siting process under way	Application to be submitted Nov. 1997	July 2000
Midwest <i>host: Ohio</i>	Enabling legislation expected in 1995	Application to be submitted 4.25 years after enabling legislation	7.25 years after enabling legislation
Northeast <i>host: Connecticut</i>	Siting process under way	Application to be submitted 1999	2002
<i>host: Illinois</i>	Siting plan under public review	Application to be submitted Jan. 1998	July 2000
Northwest <i>host: Washington</i>	Facility operational since July 1965, license reissued May 1992		
Rocky Mountain	Contract with Northeast for disposal at Washington facility		
Southeast <i>host: North Carolina</i>	Site selected	Application submitted	Mid-1998
<i>host: South Carolina</i>	Facility operational until 1996, license issued April 1971		
Southwestern <i>host: California</i>	Site selected (Ward Valley)	Application submitted Currently being litigated	Mid-1997
Texas <i>host: Texas</i>	Site selected	Application submitted	Mid-1997
Massachusetts	Siting process under way	Application Jan./Feb. 1998	2000/2001
New York	Siting process under way	Application June 1999	Nov. 2001
Michigan	Siting process under development		
District of Columbia New Hampshire Puerto Rico Rhode Island	Not planning to site a facility at this time		

Strings Attached to the Transfer

Babbitt has agreed to the transfer provided he receives "a binding commitment from the State of California that the additional safeguards recommended by the Academy panel be carried out." He also wants a specific cap set on plutonium and to limit the total volume and radioactivity of the material to be disposed of at the site to what is already specified in the state license for the facility.

In a letter to Babbitt responding to these conditions, Wilson said California would carry out the "substantive" recommendations of the Academy report such as limiting the total volume and radioactivity deposited at the site; but he does not want to be bound by the commitments and limits set by the Department of the Interior (DOI). "The

Source: Low-Level Radioactive Waste Forum

* All future dates are estimated and subject to change.

Department apparently believes that, although it has no expertise, experience or legal role in radiation safety, it should second-guess the responsible state agencies in this area," said Wilson.

The main concern of California state officials is how the Federal government plans to enforce the conditions once the land is transferred. DOI could decide to send inspectors to the site to ensure that proper monitoring is being followed. "This would be illegal," said Carol Marcus, MD, PhD, director of the nuclear medicine outpatient clinic at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance, CA. "The Department has no statutory authority to regulate

a low-level waste site. Babbitt is trying to take over the turf of the NRC and the California State Board of Radiation Health." Marcus has been attempting to contact NRC officials to get them to join forces with California on this issue.

Others are appealing to higher powers. "Our hope is that the White House will step in and clarify that this is no attempt on the part of the Clinton Administration to grant DOI jurisdiction over radiation safety," said Stephen Romano, vice president of U.S. Ecology. Romano agrees with the crux of the recommendations contained in the NAS report but does not believe they should be linked to the land transfer.

The review conducted by panel members from the NAS's National Research Council was initiated two years ago at Babbitt's urging. DOI had been considering the land transfer back then but decided to shelve the plan after receiving a memorandum from three geologists from the U.S. Geological Survey expressing seven concerns about the Ward Valley site. Babbitt called upon the panel members to address these specific concerns.

No Risk of Water Contamination

The report's authors concluded that the risk of ground water contamination at the site appears to be highly unlikely and that the risk of contamina-

tion of the nearby Colorado River is virtually nil. They did, however, recommend continued scientific measurement, monitoring and assessment if California state officials move ahead with plans to build the facility.

"The 700-foot-deep unsaturated zone between the desert surface and the ground water below is extremely dry, and contaminants are highly unlikely to pass through this zone to the water table," said George A. Thompson, chairman of the committee that authored the report and professor emeritus of geophysics at Stanford University in Stanford, CA. He cautioned, however, that the same dry conditions that make desert sites favorable for low-level waste disposal also make gathering reliable data on water flow difficult over short time periods. Thus, the committee called for the implementation of a long-term monitoring program if the site is approved for transfer to the state of California. Here are the main findings of the committee :

- Transfer of contaminants through the unsaturated zone is highly unlikely. Plutonium included in the waste slated for disposal at the site would be unlikely to reach the Colorado River. Even if all plutonium expected at the site reached the river at the same rate of disposal, effects on river quality would be "insignificant" relative to background radiation levels currently found in the river.

- Although plans are in place to monitor the unsaturated zone and ground water beneath the site, the proposed number of water monitoring wells may be inadequate. The committee recommends adding more wells to the plan and integrated monitoring, performance assessment and site characterization.

- The barrier proposed to shield the site from flooding and erosion appears to be effectively designed with thick stone and gravel layers to protect the trenches and their cover from flash floods.

- Shallow subsurface water flow toward the trenches is not a significant issue because of the dry conditions at the site combined with its particular soil characteristics and overall flatness. Facility designers, however, would need to avoid creating conditions that could lead to accumulation of standing water that might seep into the trenches.

- Plans to relocate endangered tortoises from the site to other habitats could be detrimental to the tortoise population and should be re-evaluated. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should be consulted to determine an acceptable approach for protecting the tortoises.

- Plans to provide additional protection against water infiltration by replacing desert plants removed during construction appear adequate and should not lead to soil erosion.

Deborah Kotz

New Hope for LLW Disposal in Old Facility

Since the Barnwell low-level waste (LLW) disposal facility closed to states outside the Southeast Compact last summer, many hospitals throughout the country have had no place to dispose of their radioactive wastes, and some have been storing the waste on-site. Now a new proposal from South Carolina's Governor David M. Beasley would reopen Barnwell to the entire country and would keep it open until a new facility is built in North Carolina—possibly ten years or more. Users would pay an increased fee of \$220 per cubic foot to dispose their waste at Barnwell.

South Carolina's Senate Finance Committee recently amended its budget proposal to extend the lifespan of Barnwell, which was scheduled to close permanently at the end of 1995. Already approved by the Committee, the budget was being debated on the Senate floor as of presstime. If the legislation is passed, it will go to the House-Senate conference committee where differences between the two budgets will be ironed out. (The House's original budget did not include the Barnwell proposal.) After that, the budget will be passed on to Beasley for approval, and Barnwell could reopen this summer when the budget goes into effect.