

Spent uranium to go through city

Holtec's proposed interim storage facility meets stiff opposition in Gallup

By Kathy Helms May 22, 2018

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GALLUP — Holtec International's plan to build an interim storage facility in southern New Mexico and transport spent nuclear fuel from power plants across the country by rail through Gallup, Grants and tribal communities, didn't set well with those who packed the Downtown Conference Center Monday night to voice their opposition.

State Rep. Stephanie Garcia Richard traveled from Los Alamos to address the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, host of the public scoping meeting, "because, truly, this is a matter of national importance," she said. "I would really urge the NRC to take into account the folks that are going to speak to you tonight because they have a history of a long legacy of nuclear matters," she said, similar to Los Alamos residents who live with the legacy storage of Department of Defense waste.

Richard said she learned Friday at a legislative hearing about a site approved in Utah over the objections of the public there. "I really hope that does not become the case here," she said, adding that she was sent to voice concerns from approximately seven Senate and 21 House colleagues.

Among the concerns: analysis of the transportation route that would be utilized; state permits that have been requested or would be required; potential liability to the state and financial assurances to New Mexico; emergency preparedness and the need for equipment and training; water contamination risks; seismic concerns; the stability of the site; contamination risks; longevity and viability of the transportation and storage casks and canisters; and how damaged or cracked waste containers would be handled at the facility if there is to be no hot cell to care for the casks should they rupture.



Dennis Romero, a licensed engineer and proponent of nuclear technology, urged the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to take a hard look at Holtec International's application for an interim storage facility for spent fuel during a meeting Monday night in Gallup. **Kathy Helms/Gallup Independent**

Support has limits

Dennis Romero, a licensed engineer and Gallup resident who worked at Los Alamos National Laboratory for 10 years and spent another 10 at the New Mexico Environment Department, said the NRC was not going to find a person more supportive of nuclear technology and the promise it holds.

"That being said, I would strongly recommend that the applicant withdraw its application," he said to loud applause.

Romero spent time in the nuclear Navy, and the beautiful thing about it, he said, is it has close to 60 years with zero accidents. "They do it right," he added. "You work for the NRC and I have nothing but the utmost respect for you and your profession and your agency. But privatizing waste storage does not seem to be a wise choice."

Romero worked on the Waste Isolation Pilot Project and on Yucca Mountain, the proposed permanent repository for spent nuclear fuel. "Here's the bottom line," he said. "Those were beautifully designed facilities – beautifully designed. And you know what? You still had an accident."

"I urge, as part of your scoping, please examine all risks associated with the packaging at the sites, the risks associated with the transport of the material coming into New Mexico, as well as the offloading and the storage," he said. "I ask you not just to look at the small footprint of the facility but to look at the entire operation from the time it goes from a nuke plant to the time it arrives in New Mexico." He also requested federal regulators have Holtec pay for a neutral third-party analysis and to provide a full-fledged economic analysis.

"What I'm saying is I'm a proponent of nuke power. I'm a proponent of nuke technology. And I'm asking you to seriously consider this application – and possibly denying it," Romero said.

Perfectly safe

Ed Mayer, program director for Holtec International and the project, said he served in the nuclear Navy for 27 years and commanded two submarines. "I have a deep understanding of Holtec technology," he said, "and it's the safest and most secure technology on Earth."

He provided some facts about Holtec's proposed Consolidated Interim Storage Facility and asked for the audience's support.

"Holtec International is a strong technology company and our core business for the past 32 years is the safe and secure storage of nuclear fuel. All the equipment supplied by Holtec is designed, engineered, fabricated, and in most cases, operated by Holtec employees – and we're an American company. We fabricate everything in the United States," he said. "We have an impeccable safety record. None of our equipment has ever experienced a safety issue, has leaked or caused injury."

Holtec has asked the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for a 40-year license to store waste. The first phase would consist of 500 canisters of spent nuclear fuel. Holtec anticipates applying for up to 20 phases totaling up to 10,000 canisters. Each phase would require separate licensing.

Wrong audience

"There is no safe transport or storage of nuclear waste," said Mervyn Tilden, of Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining. "What kind of safety factors are going to be used for the transport? What's going to happen if there is an accident along the way?"

Navajo Nation Council Delegate Jonathan Perry, who represents eight Eastern Navajo Agency chapters, said it was difficult to provide comments without knowing specifics about the project. "There has been no detailed information on this given to my community members. Sure, we've got the process at NRC, but how can we make adequate comments if we don't know what the full extent of the project is going to be? That needs to be shared."

Be Sergeant commented on the NRC's Crayola-colored graphics depicting the agency's environmental review process. "Here we are again, listening to the eloquence of ourselves. You know those sausages they showed in the beginning? We're all going to follow these sausages, this person is going to ask this person, and it's all going to be fair in the end. It's absolute bulls--t and we all know it," she said.

Janene Yazzie said Navajo communities are used to the nuclear fight. "We know through years of experience and data what happens when we allow these projects to come into our areas, and we're not going to allow it anymore."

Yazzie said she is tired of coming to scoping meetings and being given a plan and "all these nice printed out pamphlets that say how great these projects are."

"We're tired of being your expendable communities and your backyards for the waste to be transported. We're tired of hearing that we're dealing with this issue because nuclear power is so safe," she said. "We're on our way to transition to renewable energy, and we're tired of hearing these promises that we need to continue to accommodate these technologies that have devastated and destroyed our communities, our public health and our environment, and the futures of our children because our babies are being born with uranium in their bodies – and that can't be taken out."

"So don't come back here unless you really do have a plan to take into consideration the concerns that are being shared here, and unless you understand that it's not about tribal consultation; it's about free, prior and informed consent," she said.



Janene Yazzie told the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission that local communities are tired of being considered expendable and tired of hearing that nuclear power is safe, during a public scoping meeting Monday night in Gallup on Holtec International's proposed interim storage facility.

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