

Report from the Blue Ribbon Commission meeting

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The question of the day is: ***What do we do with all of the nuclear waste in this nation?*** I attended a meeting of national importance on Tuesday to hear the public's thoughts on exactly this question. The meeting was held by President Obama's Blue Ribbon Commission as part of their research to make recommendations on the nation's nuclear waste disposal policy.

Alarming, although unsurprisingly, the focus of the meeting veered away from disposing of the nation's nuclear waste in a deep geologic repository – the only reasonable alternative from a public health perspective – to discussion of reprocessing this nuclear waste.

### **The Blue Ribbon Commission**

The 15-member commission includes representatives from industry, government, and academia and is co-chaired by former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and former Indiana Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton. It is scheduled to provide a first set of recommendations in 18 months and a final report within the next 24 months. It will review the government's management of the nuclear fuel cycle and consider all alternatives for the storage, processing, and disposal of used nuclear fuel, high-level waste, and materials resulting from nuclear activities.

What has concerned activists from the beginning is the lack of public interest or tribal representation on the panel, and the fact that long-settled policy mandating deep geological disposal of dangerously long-lived nuclear waste is on the block. This is the chance that nuclear industry has been paying all the lobbying money for all these years.

What does this mean for Hanford? The short answer: a lot.

### **Yucca Mountain, the Nuclear Waste Policy Act and Hanford**

The nuclear waste policy in the United States was set by Congress in 1982 with the passage of the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. In 1987, Congress designated Nevada's Yucca Mountain to be the site for a permanent disposal site for the nation's commercial nuclear waste. The military nuclear waste, from places like Hanford, would also end up at Yucca Mountain.

However, Congress jumped the gun: the suitability of Yucca Mountain to be the long-term repository had not been determined. It turns out the rock at Yucca Mountain is so porous and fractured, with pathways that permit highly corrosive groundwater to move rapidly through it to the aquifer below, that DOE has had to engineer ever-more-exotic "fixes" in attempts to compensate for the site's fundamental inadequacies. Subsequent testing revealed that the site was riddled with earthquake faults, and was geologically unstable. Worse, evidence of hot geological water uprising through the mountain in the

past 3,000 years cast serious doubt on Yucca's suitability. The site that is chosen should remain dry for 100,000 years, given the long-lived nature of the radioactive products that will be stored there.

Perhaps a bigger factor, however, was the ascendancy of Senator Harry Reid from Nevada as the Senate Majority Leader. Reid, reflecting the overwhelming desires of his constituency, adamantly opposed the selection of Yucca Mountain, and promised to choke off funding for the site. After only a few months in office, President Obama put the kibosh on the project altogether.

Opponents have complained that the decision to cancel Yucca Mountain was political. No doubt. But what these same critics fail to note is that the *selection* of Yucca Mountain was also political, not based on science. The bill introduced into Congress designating Yucca Mountain's status was widely-known as the "Screw Nevada" bill.

All that said, nuclear waste policy in the United States has been settled for decades: spent nuclear fuel and high-level nuclear waste should be buried in a deep geological repository and isolated from the living eco-system for as long as possible. With the announcement of the Blue Ribbon Commission, however, President Obama has re-opened a can of worms, and put the geological disposal policy at risk. We should be worried.

So what does this mean for Hanford? The State of Washington has gone to the mat and filed a lawsuit against the federal government for its decision to cancel Yucca Mountain. Local interests in the Tri-Cities have also filed their own lawsuits. But the reality is that only about 7% of Yucca Mountain's storage space was dedicated to the Department of Energy for its high-level nuclear waste. Testimony by a Bush administration Energy Secretary made it clear: Yucca Mountain was oversubscribed with commercial nuclear waste. It was increasingly unlikely that *any* of Hanford's vitrified high-level nuclear waste would end up at Yucca Mountain.

### **The Dirty Truth**

The not-so-hidden agenda of some members of the Blue Ribbon Commission is to push an alternative method of dealing with the nation's nuclear waste: reprocessing. The nuclear industry uses the term "recycling." Reprocessing takes spent nuclear fuel from reactors and, using chemical treatment, recovers uranium and plutonium for further use in a reactor, or for nuclear weapons. Hanford conducted reprocessing for 45 years of its operational history, for the purpose of recovering plutonium, resulting in the creation of the worst-contaminated facility in the nation. Bob Alvarez, former Department of Energy official and national expert on nuclear issues, wrote recently in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*:

"Reprocessing plants release about 15,000 times more radioactivity into the environment than nuclear power plants and generate wastes with high decay heat. Other efforts to build what is called a "closed fuel cycle," where waste is recycled and reused in reactors have failed for 50 years. Such failure has left about 250 tons of excess plutonium stored at reprocessing plants around the world--enough for some 30,000 nuclear weapons. It's time to accept that a once-through nuclear fuel cycle, where spent fuel is put into permanent geologic storage, is the only

sensible option.” - [Bulletin of Atomic Scientists](#), Bob Alvarez, Advice for the Blue Ribbon Commission, March 24, 2010.

### **Who Said What & the Not-So-Public Interests**

At the meeting this week in Richland, the Blue Ribbon Commission toured Hanford in the morning and took public comment in the afternoon. Among those commenting, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla representative Stu Harris spoke eloquently about the long-term impacts of Hanford on his people. He observed that in less than one generation Hanford has become so contaminated that “my people will be left with a contaminated land so severe for 10,000 years.”

Ken Niles, representing the State of Oregon, commented that Hanford is not an appropriate location for additional waste storage, generation or disposal, and that any solution to nuclear waste disposal options must take into account transportation issues, and that defense high-level waste should be developed separately from commercial. Niles stated that Hanford’s high-level waste cannot be reprocessed (having already undergone reprocessing).

Niles noted that “Twenty years ago, we were ten years away from vitrification. Today, we are still ten years away from vitrification.” Vitrification is the process that will be used to immobilize Hanford’s high level nuclear waste for storage.

Susan Leckband, the Chair of the Hanford Advisory Board, stated that the cleanup race is not a sprint but a marathon. Noting that most members of the HAB live in the Tri-Cities, and that future generations will live here, “we are concerned that Hanford will become a national nuclear waste defacto repository.” She expressed concern that “interim High Level Waste storage would last for decades,” and that the Hanford cleanup budget should not be tasked with the storage bill. She also noted that the national will for a high-level waste repository nationally may fade – leaving Hanford holding the bag.

Gerry Pollet, Executive Director of Heart of America Northwest, provided thorough and provocative comments. He took direct aim at reprocessing – an appropriate target given that Hanford is the best advertisement you could dream up against reprocessing. Gerry also pounded on DOE’s decision to cap and cover-up 43 linear miles of unlined contaminated trenches at Hanford without even characterizing the trenches (examining and analyzing the radiological and toxic materials in the trench. Gerry supported the Obama decision to close Yucca Mountain, pointing out that Hanford’s waste wouldn’t go there anyway.

Gerry’s testimony drew the ire of Commission member Pete Domenici, a retired Senator from New Mexico, and tireless proponent of the nuclear industry. Domenici went on an inept and cranky attack on Gerry, questioning his sources (Department of Energy figures) and his motives. He asked Gerry whether he worked on the issue as a full-time salaried position, and asked what that salary was. He asked Gerry whether he believed in “good science” and chided Gerry for answering the question, claiming that Gerry was interrupting his tirade. To the extent that Senator Domenici is representative of the Blue Ribbon Commission’s level of bile, understanding and receptiveness, the public is in for a rough ride.

Following Gerry's comments, Vic Parrish, the CEO of Energy NW which owns the Columbia Generating Station, Washington State's only operating nuclear plant, took the podium. Unlike Pollet's reception, the Blue Ribbon Commission fawned all over Parrish, remarking that his was the kind of testimony that they truly valued, with one Commissioner inviting Parrish to join them and give them the benefit of his advice. Nobody asked Parrish what his salary was.

Parrish commented that Energy Northwest had put \$290 million into a national nuclear waste fund (actually the ratepayers did that) and that nationally, ratepayers had put \$34 billion into that fund. Parrish extolled the benefits of reprocessing, and endorsed the breeder reactor concept of using plutonium as an energy fuel for the future.

One Commissioner, the apparent token voice for accountability, asked Parrish who he thought would fund his dream of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel and embarking on an ambitious breeder reactor program. His response: ***the taxpayer.***

The exchange highlighted the ludicrous position that this nation finds itself in with regards to nuclear waste policy. Even as the nuclear utilities have successfully sued the government for billions of dollars in damages for failing to come up with a national nuclear waste repository (*taxpayer money*), the Obama Administration is offering **\$54 billion** in 100% loan guarantees to utilities to build even more nuclear plants – for which there is no disposal path for waste, meaning that *the taxpayer* will continue to pay billions more to the same utilities for **not** dealing with the waste problem. Are we clear now?

In summary, the public can expect more obfuscation and political maneuvering by the nuclear industry to put its mitts on even more government money, even as these plants prove to be economically unfeasible and environmental disasters for the long term. The Blue Ribbon Commission seems to have been set up to abet that agenda.