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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Room 2125, Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6115

July 24, 1992

JOHN S. ORLANDO, CHIEF OF STAFF
ALAN J. ROTH, CHIEF COUNSEL

The Honorable Ivan Selin
Chairman
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Washington, D.C. 20555

Dear Chairman Selin:

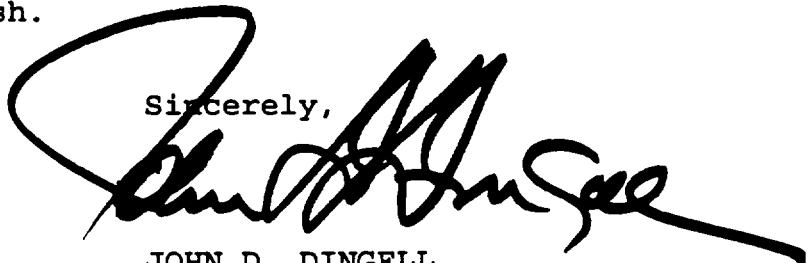
I have enclosed a June 25, 1992 newspaper article from the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

I would appreciate your comments on the article and the suggestion in it that changes could be made to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's regular procedures which would assist in reducing costs of the Yucca Mountain project.

I would also like to know of subsequent communications you may have had with officials at the Department of Energy on this issue.

With every good wish.

Sincerely,



JOHN D. DINGELL
CHAIRMAN

Enclosure

Reductions

DOE aims to cut costs of nuke dump

□ Officials studying Yucca Mountain say they could bury nuclear wastes earlier to cut a \$6.3 billion bill.

By Tony Batt
Donrey Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Energy Department still is "thinking out loud" about ways to reduce the estimated \$6.3 billion cost of licensing a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, including the possibility of storing waste at the site before it is fully licensed, the program's director told the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Wednesday.

While the placement of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain before its projected opening in 2010 would require a special license from the NRC and legislation from Congress, the department also is considering cost-cutting options that would not require special permission, said John Bartlett, director of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management.

He told regulators that project officials are weighing the idea of conducting fewer site tests to back its license application, or placing nuclear waste

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From 1B

at a "test evaluation facility" near Yucca Mountain but off the study site. Bartlett said he did not know how much money these measures could save.

"What I want to emphasize is that there's nothing new here," Bartlett told commissioners. "We have for years been looking at contingencies, alternatives for dealing with cost, dealing with progress."

The department has suggested accepting some waste at Yucca Mountain and incorporating it into studies of whether the site, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, could safely store the highly radioactive material for 10,000 years. Department officials have not said how much waste would be needed to speed its studies.

Discussion of cost-cutting options accelerated after several senators at a March 31 hearing on Capitol Hill expressed alarm about escalating expenses, Bartlett said.

Bartlett's comments drew a puzzled reaction from NRC Chairman Ivan Selin.

"I really am up in the air as to what you're thinking about and where it is that the NRC would have to change its procedures," Selin told Bartlett. "Are you going to come to us with some quite different course of action or is this just sort of thinking out loud?"

"It's really thinking out loud at this stage," Bartlett responded. "We are not coming with any proposed alternative course of action."

Asked after the hearing if the NRC would be willing to consider issuing a special license for the early storage of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain, Selin said, "I'm not going to answer that until something is actually proposed. So far, he (Bartlett) hasn't asked

us to do anything that would require us to change our procedures."

Bartlett first discussed the possible early storage of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain during an address to a group of nuclear utility executives on May 6 in Washington.

At that time, he said the Energy Department hoped to decide within a few weeks whether to pursue that option. But he said Wednesday he did not think the department would decide before August.

Bartlett has said early storage of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain could save money by allowing the Energy Department to more quickly collect data for licensing reviews.

But NRC Commissioner Kenneth Rogers suggested Wednesday early storage of nuclear waste away from Yucca Mountain would be preferable because it could be done at a "modest cost" without triggering "public concern issues which raise the cost very, very high."

Bartlett seemed cool to Rogers' suggestion, saying if the early storage of waste occurs at a site away from Yucca Mountain, it probably could not be located further away than Arizona.

"One of the issues in using a test evaluation facility is how representative really is the data," Bartlett said. "If you're not in the same geology, if you're not in the same formation, that's one of the issues associated with that."

On a related subject, Bartlett said the Energy Department believes it is not obligated to take possession of nuclear waste from power plants if a temporary or permanent repository is not ready by 1998.

However, Commissioner James Curtiss cited a Sept. 7, 1984, let-

ter from then Energy Secretary Donald Hodel who said the department had interpreted federal law to require it to accept the waste in 1998 even if it had no place to store it.

Selin also chided Bartlett for blaming NRC regulations for skyrocketing costs in developing the Yucca Mountain repository.

"You haven't come to NRC and said you disagree with the procedures," Selin said. "The Department of Energy has not come up with suggestions on how to reduce cost."

Bartlett denied he had blamed the NRC for escalating costs.

Carl Gertz, the Energy Department's site supervisor at Yucca Mountain, told the commission that recent drilling at the site revealed its geology is more uniform than previously thought.

"This may be simpler than we thought," Gertz said about the site characterization studies.

Gertz said 7 inches of rain this spring gave Energy Department officials an opportunity to monitor seepage of rainfall at Yucca Mountain. He said preliminary studies showed the rain did not go further down than 100 feet, and the repository will be 1,000 feet below the mountain.

John Roberts, the Energy Department's acting director of the Office of Systems and Compliance, told the commission that erosion at Yucca Mountain "appears to be minimal."

At the beginning of Wednesday's hearings, Energy Department officials played segments of Las Vegas television news broadcasts about a June 16 news media tour of Yucca Mountain. Bartlett and Gertz said local news media are treating the Energy Department more fairly.