

October 15, 1999

Dr. Robert M. Hamilton, Executive Director  
Commission on Geosciences, Environment, and Resources  
National Research Council  
2101 Constitution Avenue  
Washington, DC 20418

**SUBJECT: REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL'S BOARD ON  
RADIOACTIVE WASTE MANAGEMENT**

Dear Dr. Hamilton:

In response to your letter of September 23, 1999, requesting assistance in a review of the National Research Council's Board on Radioactive Waste Management, enclosed is a response to the specific questions you asked that we focus on. We hope these comments will provide the assistance you need in conducting your review. If you have questions regarding the enclosed response, please contact Ms. Patricia A. Santiago, at (301) 415-7269 or E-mail PAS2@NRC.GOV.

Sincerely,

**NRC FILE CENTER COPY**

[Original Signed by]

John T. Greeves, Director  
Division of Waste Management  
Office of Nuclear Materials Safety  
and Safeguards

Enclosure: As stated

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## Review of the National Research Council's Board on Radioactive Waste Management

Question 1: What in your opinion is the Board's standing?

### Response to Question 1:

The Board on Radioactive Waste Management (BRWM) is a well-known and respected institution in the field of waste management. Its membership is diverse and includes a variety of disciplines and experience from academia, government, and industry. The BRWM has issued two major reports, in the last several years, that relate directly to key U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) programs. The first was a report on seven specific issues related to the proposed Ward Valley low-level radioactive (LLW) waste disposal facility in California. The report, issued by a special committee of the BRWM in 1995, was exhaustive, complete, and authoritative in addressing the issues. As noted in a recent Government Accounting Office report on the national LLW program, public and political opposition continues to underlie the lack of progress in that program. Thus, while BRWM reports in certain areas are very useful and provide a unique contribution, other factors may affect outcomes in particular programs.

BRWM has also published/sponsored a number of reports concerning Yucca Mountain (Groundwater at Yucca Mountain, How High Can It Rise? - 1992; Review of U.S. Department of Energy Technical Basis Report for Surface Characteristics, Preclosure Hydrology, and Erosion - 1995; Rethinking High Level Radioactive Waste Disposal -1990; Health Effects of Exposure to Radon - 1994). The BRWM report entitled "Technical Bases for Yucca Mountain Standards," has provided valuable input for NRC's development of a rule for the Yucca Mountain standards. The BRWM committee analyzed and made recommendations on several controversial and difficult issues, such as [reliance on institutional controls, scenarios for human intrusion into the repository, and cumulative release rates of radioactive materials.] BRWM reports have provided authoritative and thorough discussions of issues that decision makers have considered. These publications are of good quality, objective, useful, and timely. We cannot comment on the breadth of coverage of scientific and technical, and policy issues, or the efficiency with which it responds to task orders or original requests for the report.

Question 2: How might the Board be of greater value to its sponsors and to its other constituencies? What major issues should it address?

### Response to Question 2.

BRWM can be of greater value if it coordinated its scientific work, and possibly sponsored joint studies/projects, with the other National Council's Boards, including, for example, Board on Earth Sciences and Resources, and the Water Science and Technology Board.

ENCLOSURE

**Question 3: Are there any other aspects of the Board's performance you wish to raise or information you might provide that would assist the Board in improving its activities?**

**Response to Question 3:**

**It is suggested that BRWM broaden its coverage (e.g., be less focused on DOE; address confidence building in models and compliance with the health standards; engineered barrier performance); and increase publicity of its meetings and workshops, as well as its completed work (for example, Board's website is not easy to locate).**