



Waste Awareness and Reduction Network

NC WARN

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Groups Hold Hearing on Nuclear Waste Risks in North Carolina, Call for Change in Waste Storage Methods

Residents to Demand Action to Reduce Hazards of High-Level Nuclear Waste Storage and Transport

APEX, North Carolina – Local and national public interest organizations are holding a citizen’s hearing on Saturday at which they will call for immediate action to reduce vulnerabilities of nuclear waste shipments and storage sites in North Carolina and across the country.

NC WARN (Waste Awareness and Reduction Network) and Public Citizen are hosting the hearing in Apex, less than 10 miles from the Progress Energy-owned Shearon Harris nuclear power plant, to provide an opportunity for citizens to voice their concerns to elected officials and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). Many citizens are frustrated with the NRC and its failure to consider the concerns of residents.

“The vulnerabilities of irradiated fuel cooling pools and nuclear waste trains to accident or attack are apparent,” said community activist Carrie Bolton, who will facilitate Saturday’s hearing. “If there are better technologies available for storing this waste, why isn’t Progress Energy using them?”

The hearing will feature a panel of nationally recognized experts, including Bob Alvarez, former senior advisor to the U.S. Department of Energy.

“It is our custodial duty to take action now to reduce the hazards densely packed irradiated fuel pools present,” Alvarez said.

Alvarez is the co-author of a recently released Princeton/MIT study, which is the scientific backbone for an emerging national grassroots campaign advocating the hardened, dispersed storage of nuclear waste – i.e., storing the waste not in high-density pools, but in separated and reinforced dry storage casks.

According to the abstract of the study, “Spent fuel recently discharged from a reactor could heat up relatively rapidly ... could catch fire. ... The fire could well spread to older fuel. The long-term land-contamination consequences of such an event could be significantly worse than those from Chernobyl. No such event has occurred thus far. However, the consequences would affect such a large area that alternatives to dense-pack storage must be examined.”

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Arjun Makhijani, another panelist and president of the Institute for the Environment and Energy Research, agrees with Alvarez's characterization of risks. He has presented a model for safer nuclear waste storage at U.S. nuclear power plants.

"Progress Energy, which has generated so much nuclear waste in North Carolina, should lead the way in reducing vulnerabilities at storage sites," he said. "With high-level radioactive wastes, if we do something, it must be the right thing because we won't get a second chance to be wrong."

Since 1998, NC WARN has advocated for safer storage at all nuclear plants in North Carolina and the halt of nuclear waste imports by Progress Energy to the Shearon Harris plant in Wake County. Progress Energy recently announced it is moving to stop the shipment of waste to Harris by 2005 but existing waste will still be there. NC WARN maintains that stopping shipments will be a step in the right direction, but more must be done to improve safety and security at Harris.

NC WARN is challenging Progress Energy to set a national industry standard by lowering the density of waste in all its pools and storing all but the newest spent fuel in hardened, dispersed storage.

NC WARN also has put pressure on North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper to act in the public interest by mandating this storage method, which is used at plants in Germany and Switzerland.

"High-level nuclear waste is dangerous enough sitting still; transporting it unjustifiably increases radiation risks, putting communities along transportation routes in harm's way," said Lisa Gue, senior energy analyst for Public Citizen, who will discuss the dangers of nuclear waste transportation as part of the hearing.

Public comments will be recorded at Saturday's event in response to an NRC proposal for limited testing of nuclear waste transportation casks. Currently regulations do not require nuclear waste transportation casks to be physically tested at full scale. Although the NRC has held public workshops on this proposal in other parts of the country, the agency has planned no such hearing in North Carolina, where Progress Energy is the only utility currently transporting nuclear waste.

"We have one of the largest nuclear waste storage sites in our backyard," said Rev. Carrie Bolton, a Pittsboro resident. "Yet the federal government has refused to hear our voices or concerns. We insist that the NRC, Progress Energy and most of all, our elected officials heed our concerns."

Details: May 31st, 2003 from 10 am to 3 pm, Salem Elementary School, Apex, NC

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NC WARN is a member-based grassroots organization using science and activism to reduce hazards to public health and the environment from industrial and radioactive pollution. For more information, please visit www.ncwarn.org.

Public Citizen is a national, nonprofit consumer advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.citizen.org.