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NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
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TO: Mr. John Greeves, Director, LLWM

FROM: Paul T. Prestholt, Sr. On-Site Licensing Representative

DATE: December 8, 1987

SUBJECT: Newspaper Articles

Please find enclosed more information that appeared in our local newspaper that is of interest.

PTP:nan

cc: Mr. Greg Cook
Ms. Sue Gagner

Huge nuke fuel burial at NTS

DOE to ship 6-foot-high football field of thorium from Ohio

By Mary Manning
SUN Staff Writer

The U.S. Department of Energy plans to ship 340,000 cubic feet of the nuclear fuel thorium, a low-level radioactive material used in breeder reactors, from a defense plant in Ohio to the Nevada Test Site, a DOE spokesman said Friday.

Truck shipments are expected to start in April or May, DOE spokesman Chris West said. The Nevada Test Site has accepted off-site defense nuclear wastes since April 1978, he said.

The radioactive thorium shipments expected at the test site would cover one football field to a depth of 5.9 feet, West said.

Truck companies are hired by DOE and must follow U.S. Department of Transportation routes, usually interstate highways, he said. However, the thorium is low-level enough that "a person can handle it and not have an exposure problem from radiation," he added.

The test site's low-level dump receives contaminated gloves, soil, tools, filters, rubber gloves and test tubes amounting to up to 500,000 cubic feet a year, West said. "This is going to add a lot to it," he added.

Thorium — a material radioactive for 78,000 years — was stored at DOE's Fernald, Ohio

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Nuclear fuel will be sent to Nevada Test Site

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plant called the Feed Materials Production Center, near Cincinnati, after President Jimmy Carter stopped breeder reactor research in the 1970s.

All thorium, residues and byproducts will be shipped to Nevada's site either in steel drums encased in "six-pack" cartons — 2,200 packs containing 13,200 barrels — or in 15,000 barrels shipped separately, West said.

All of the thorium is in solid form, he said, since liquids have not been buried at the test site since the low-level storage facility opened in the early 1960s. Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Co. operates this test site's repository, he added.

The test site receives shipments from 16 defense facilities across the country, such as contaminated materials from national defense laboratories.

Much of it arrives by truck at the site in cardboard or plywood boxes, West said. Other shipments are packed into steel barrels, the way Fernald's thorium will arrive, he noted.

It costs DOE $3 million a year to run the low-level site, but defense contractors pay the Nevada Operations Office, West said.

Nuclear wastes are buried at the test site in several ways, West explained. The 92-acre dump at Frenchman Flat keeps radioactive materials in trenches 700 feet long, 50 feet wide and 21 feet deep covered with dirt, or pits 750 feet long by 100 to 600 feet wide and 28 feet deep.

There have been 4 million cubic feet of radioactive materials buried at the test site.

All of it is marked on the surface of those pits, and the information is computerized so it could be recovered for reprocessing or re-use in 50 or 100 years, West said.

In addition, test site workers are burying contaminated debris like steel towers used in the early atomic bomb days in an old nuclear weapons crater that has 7 million cubic feet in it, he said.

The site is also holding 17,500 cubic feet of transuranic waste — a radioactive label that places materials between the high and low category, with longer radioactivity than low-level — awaiting shipment to the Waste Isolation Pilot Project in Carlsbad, N.M., West said.

Bryan raps radioactive shipments

By Laura Wingard
Review-Journal

A plan by the federal government to ship 28,200 barrels of radioactive material to the Nevada Test Site, probably using a route through Las Vegas, has angered Gov. Richard Bryan, but he doubts he can legally challenge it.

The U.S. Department of Energy announced Friday that it plans to ship the low-level radioactive material from its facility in Fernald, Ohio, 18 miles northwest of Cincinnati, to the test site, beginning in April.

The likely route for the shipments, which will continue over several months, includes bringing the trucks through Las Vegas on Interstate 15, said Chris West, an Energy Department spokesman in Las Vegas.

Although it's doubtful the state has any control over the federal shipments, Bryan said, "I still don't like it."

Bryan said he would talk to Attorney General Brian McKay on Monday to see if the state can take any legal action against the Energy Department. "My preference would be to persuade the DOE to not ship it to Nevada in the first place," Bryan said.

If that fails, he said, he would try to get the Energy Department to change the truck route to avoid heavily populated Las Vegas.

West said the department prefers to use the interstates, considered to be the best maintained roads in the U.S. highway system, for radioactive shipments.

But Bryan said, when it comes to disposing of nuclear waste, the department has the attitude: "If nobody else wants it, give it to Nevada."

He compared the latest plan to ship radioactive material to Nevada to the Energy Department choosing Yucca Mountain, 110 miles northwest of Las Vegas, as one of three possible sites for the nation's first high-level nuclear waste dump.

West said the 340,000 cubic feet of thorium, a radioactive metal used in breeder reactors to produce weapons-grade uranium, will be buried in a pit at the test site's 92-acre low-level radioactive waste dump.

Please see SHIPMENTS/4A

Saturday, December 5, 1987
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Shipments

From 1A

The dump at the test site, also operated by the Energy Department, annually accepts about 500,000 cubic feet of radioactive waste from other department facilities, West said. Most of the waste is contaminated soil, tools, filters, gloves and other material used in making nuclear weapons, he said.

The thorium, contained in barrels inside barrels, is in the form of solid metal, powder and pellets, he said.

The department does not consider the thorium a radioactive waste and is storing it so it can be retrieved for future use, West said. "But we're reporting it to the state as a waste," he said.

The risk of contamination from the shipments is so remote that test site personnel will not even wear protective clothing when they bury the barrels of radioactive material, West said.

The thorium is currently being kept at the Energy Department's Feed Materials Production Center in Fernald. Edward Silberstein, chairman of an environmental and health advisory committee in Ohio, said the barrels of thorium are sitting in warehouses, silos and outside in drums.

Silberstein, a professor of radiology and medicine at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, said he doubts the thorium shipments would pose an environmental risk to the public.

"It's not a liquid so it doesn't leak. It's hard to see a problem," he said. "At least it's getting out of here."

The thorium was stored in Ohio because the building of new U.S. breeder reactors has been abandoned due to the high cost of constructing them.