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Director of hot waste project expects no hastiness in decision

Associated Press

RICHLAND, Wash. - A single decision that could affect humans for the next 10,000 years won't be made lightly, says the director of a study that could lead to placement of repository of highly radioactive wastes here.

Larry Fitch, director of the Basalt Waste Isolation Project at the Hanford nuclear reservation in eastern Washington, said Wednesday "there are no decisions going to be made that are irreversible" in finding a site.

"We are facing, for the first time in human history, knowingly making a 10,000-year decision," said Fitch, of Hanford Rockwell.

That is because any repository, buried deep underground, would have to protect its deadly contents from reaching the environment for at least 10,000 ears, he said.

A presidential decision on which of three sites will house the first repository is scheduled for 1991.

"I would expect that decision ... is going to be an exceedingly difficult decision to make," said Fitch.

As outlined by the Nuclear

Waste Policy Act of 1982, the nation's first repository for highly radioactive wastes from commercial nuclear reactors will be selected after extensive studies at three sites.

Hanford, Deaf Smith County in Texas and Yucca Mountain in Nevada are among five finalists and are considered the three most likely sites, although a total of nine locations have been studied.

Hanford sits atop basalt, a mineral formed millions of years ago as flows of lava flooded eastern Washington.

If Hanford is chosen this year as one of the three sites for further study, scientists and technicians will begin a five-year program of study of the underground basalt formations to be the final resting place for about one-half of the nation's high level nuclear waste, Fitch said.

One of the tests would be the Basalt Waste Isolation Project, which would bore a tunnel more than 3,000 feet beneath the surface in order to study the underground pressures and water flows, he said.

At a meeting with Oregon and Washington legislators on Wednesday, representatives of

the Yakima, Nez Perce and Umatilla tribes voiced concerns about work already done on the proposed repository as well as future studies.

Those concerns included contamination of groundwater, the effects of flooding, erosion and the effects on humans.

"The reason we want to test at depth is to look at the hydrology ... how does water move through the basalt," he said.

Based on what the studies find, Hanford may, or may not, be recommended by the president as the site of the first repository, Fitch said.

"Whether Hanford is the best site or not, I don't know. But I think we know how to find out," said Fitch of the project. "We hope the information can show that (radioactivity) will never get back into man's environment."

Fitch said the study process would be thorough, and that even if the president did recommend a particular site to Congress, the state or tribes could veto the decision.

Such a veto could be overturned, however, by a simple majority of both houses of Congress.

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Waste site decision delayed until April

Associated Press

LACEY, Wash. — Word on whether the Hanford nuclear reservation will be formally nominated as a possible burial site for highly radioactive wastes has been delayed from February until late April, the state Nuclear Waste Board has learned.

The board recently heard that the federal Department of Energy again has postponed issuing final environmental assessments on the high-level waste repository candidate sites.

The assessments will identify the federal department's top three choices for permanent storage of highly radioactive waste from nuclear power plants and defense operations and will describe how those choice were made.

In draft assessments, the Hanford reservation and sites in Nevada and Texas were ranked as the preferred sites. If named in the official "top three," Hanford will undergo as much as five years of study, costing about \$1 billion.

The Energy Department said the latest delay is necessary to allow the National Academy of Sciences to review how the top sites were chosen.

Gov. Booth Gardner and others had pushed for a study of methods used to rank the sites, and the DOE agreed late last year to allow the academy to study its selection process.

Now the department says the academy's study is taking longer than expected.

Sites in 7 states scanned for nuclear waste vault

Associated Press

WASHINGTON - The Energy Department on Thursday selected seven states as possibilities for a second vault to store highly radioactive nuclear waste for 10,000 years.

A dozen candidate sites were chosen in Georgia, Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Virginia and Wisconsin.

The selection set off immediate protests from governors and other officials of most of the seven states and expressions of relief from those not picked.

"If it's not a good site, it's to the state's advantage and ours to find that out," Ben Rusche, head of DOE's civilian radioactive waste office, said of the criticism.

Congress in 1982 directed the department to plan for two underground repositories, using different geologies if possible, to isolate an expected 140,000 metric tons - 154,000 U.S. tons - of spent reactor fuel, weapons waste and other highly radioactive material.

The 12 sites chosen Thursday are granite or other crystalline rock formations - three in Minnesota, two each in Maine, North Carolina and Virginia and one each in New Hampshire, Georgia and Wisconsin.

An additional eight sites - five in Minnesota and one each in Georgia, Wisconsin and New Hampshire - were chosen as backups

in case any of the front-runners has to be dropped, an event Rusche said was unlikely.

Some 215 possibilities in 10 other states - Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, South Carolina and Michigan - were dropped from further consideration.

Only one site actually has been authorized by Congress, which would have to approve a second. DOE earlier chose a salt formation in Texas, a basalt formation in Washington state and a tuff formation in Nevada as finalists for the first repository, with a presidential decision scheduled for 1991 on which one to use.

Until Congress decides on a second site, the first is limited to 70,000 metric tons, although Rusche said either could hold all expected material. He said it was "not a foregone conclusion" that a second site actually will be decided upon.

If a second site is chosen, the decision would come in 1998 for use in about 2006. The first repository is supposed to open in 1998.

Some apparently suitable rock formations were ruled out even before the 235 candidates were picked.

Other reasons for excluding candidates were the presence of a community of 2,500 people or 1,000 people on any square mile, proximity to other centers of population, pro-

tected federal lands such as national parks and forests, similar protected lands of states and Indian tribes, habitat for threatened and endangered species, mines or quarries greater than 328 feet deep and unsuitable geology and hydrology.

Those criteria ruled out 13,600 square miles or 18 percent of the starting amount, leaving 61,500 square miles in the 235 areas.

The further winnowing was done by consulting scientific reports, especially state geological surveys. Only now will test borings begin to be made, and detailed study of areas 2,000 feet to 4,000 feet down will be reserved for the final three possibilities.

A repository would require 39 square miles on the surface as a buffer zone to protect the 2,000 underground acres and 400 surface acres actually used. Some of the 12 finalists and eight backups are far larger, but Rusche said "we didn't have the data" to pick which 39 square miles in each place would be the best.

The installation would amount to "a good-sized business" for its area, Rusche said, with 1,000 jobs while operating and perhaps as many as 3,000 while under construction.

In the final stages, a state may formally object to selection, and it will take a vote of Congress to override that rejection.