

Qualifications for nuclear waste sites are too broad, NRC says

By FRED ANKLAM
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — The Nuclear Regulatory Commission indicated Wednesday that it wants the U.S. Department of Energy to detail more clearly how potential sites for a nuclear waste repository might be disqualified from consideration.

The interest in what are called "disqualifying factors" was displayed during a meeting of the commissioners and their staff, which has drafted a proposed response to the DOE guidelines.

The NRC must concur with the guidelines before they can be implemented and the selection process begun. DOE is considering sites in six states — Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, Texas, Utah and Washington — as a possible repository for wastes from the nation's nuclear power plants.

Representatives of the states have charged that the guidelines are so generally written that none of the potential sites can be disqualified until late in the selection process.

"I don't accept the states' contention that we need specific numerical limits (for a site) to pass or fail," said Commissioner James Asselstine. "But I think DOE can give qualitative descriptions of conditions that they would not be comfortable with (in a potential site.)"

Taking the example of seismic activity, Asselstine said the guidelines proposed by DOE cite as "potentially adverse conditions" the existence of active earthquake faults or a history of earthquakes of the magnitude to disrupt a potential site.

Asselstine said the wording of the guidelines isn't strong enough to indicate if such "potentially adverse conditions" are actually "disqualifying factors." The commission wants a clearer

definition of the seismic conditions that would disqualify a site, although it doesn't think DOE has to go so far as to say that any previous earthquake of a specific magnitude would automatically disqualify a site, he said.

"We want a tighter mesh at the outset in terms of screening the sites" to ensure that the sites remaining at the end of the process will be acceptable, he said.

Allowing sites to remain in consideration despite major flaws — as the states have charged the DOE guidelines would allow — could result in unsatisfactory sites making the final stage of the selection process and wasting millions of dollars of research, Asselstine said.

More specific criteria should be developed in areas of geology, hydrology and seismology, he said. But NRC chairman Nunzio Palladino cautioned about how restrictive the disqualifying factors should be.

"I don't think our trouble is going to be in disqualifying sites," Palladino said. "It's going to be in qualifying sites."

In all, the NRC has seven broad areas in which it wants to see improvements in the guidelines before it will concur.

The NRC also is coming down strongly on another area of concern by the states — that "engineered barriers" will be used to compensate for some geologic fault in a potential waste site. Engineered barriers is the term for the containers and storage system used to store the waste.

The 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act requires that a repository be in operation by 1993, but DOE has already acknowledged it is about three years behind in its timetable for meeting that deadline.



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WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY

HIGH-LEVEL NUCLEAR WASTE MANAGEMENT LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS

Status as of: March 2, 1984

Status	Senate Bills	Sponsor	
H Passed	ESB 4534	Williams	Provides for Governor to set a salary for Chair of the Policy & Review Board and Advisory Council, and would make position subject to advice and consent of the Senate.
S Energy	SB 4548	Williams	Would make proposed Consultation and Cooperation Agreement a part of state law.
H Rules 2	SB 4558	Williams	Would establish procedure for Legislature to convene to consider any Presidential decision recommending a site in Washington State for a High-Level waste repositior.
S 2nd Reading	SCR 142	Hurley	Any agreement negotiated between the State and USDOE regarding siting a repository in Washington State would be subject to review by the Legislature prior to its final signing.
Filed Secretary of State	SJM 127	Williams	Requests USDOE to advance studies on suitability of other geologic media (such as granite). Would request that granite site be characterized with others for the first repository.
Filed Secretary of State	ESJM 131	Williams	Requests elimination of liability limits for nuclear-related accidents as set under the Price-Anderson Act.

House Bills Sponsor

Passed both Houses	ESHB 1637	Nelson	Would redesignate existing Nuclear Waste Policy & Review Board as the "Nuclear Waste Board" and add the director of the state Water Research Center at WSU as a member. The Board would be responsible for identifying and reviewing state agency policies, analyzing recommendations of the Advisory Council, carry out educational programs in coordination with the Advisory Council, reviewing work of technical committees, participate in the consultation and cooperation process under the federal waste policy Act, carry out lead agency responsibilities in negotiating agreements with the federal government. The Legislation also defines a legislative review process for agreements and amendments. If the state were to be selected as a site for a repository, the Board would review the site for its suitability and recommend to the Governor and Legislative approval or disapproval of the site selection. Upon request of the Board, the Department of Ecology could delegate any of the activities assigned to the Board.
H Rules 2	HJM 39	Nelson	Same as SJM 127 (see above)
H Energy	HCR 37	Nelson	Same as SCR 142 (see above)

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