

# NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

2101 CONSTITUTION AVENUE WASHINGTON, D. C. 20418

OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN

July 18, 1990

Mr. Eric S. Beckjord  
Director  
Nuclear Regulatory Research Div.  
Nuclear Regulatory Commission  
5650 Nicholson Lane, MS-NL007  
Rockville, MD 20852

Dear Mr. Beckjord:

In July 1988 the Board on Radioactive Waste Management of the National Research Council convened a week-long study session in Santa Barbara, California, to examine a number of issues critical to progress in disposing of high-level waste. The underlying issues raised at the study session have been key elements in the Board's thinking as it has responded to requests for assistance regarding plans and activities at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, Hanford, and other facilities. But these shorter term efforts, undertaken in the context of regulations put in place since 1982, have limited the Board's time to look at the overall strategy. The enclosed report, "Rethinking High-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal," provides such a look. It raises fundamental issues worthy of your consideration.

Representatives of the Department of Energy, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the Environmental Protection Agency as well as technical experts from the United States and abroad participated in the study session but not in the Board's preparation of this statement.

It is the Board's conclusion that current regulations create expectations of scientific certainty about the safety of waste storage systems over thousands of years that go beyond the capability of science. This does not mean that high-level waste disposal cannot proceed under appropriate conditions. The Board believes that a more flexible approach is not only possible but desirable, providing reasonable safeguards at acceptable levels of risk without requiring of science assurances that are not possible to give. Such an approach would enable changes during construction and operation of a repository as new information becomes available. It would permit public participation in the planning and during construction and operation and would be able to address incremental risks as they appear. It would make it possible to reverse decisions safely when conditions warrant. In this way scientific prediction and judgment can support wise public decisions.

We have planned no press conference in connection with the release of this report, but we will be happy to arrange a briefing if you wish.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Frank Press". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Frank Press  
Chairman

Enclosure