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Wednesday, October 26, 2005 - 12:00 AM

Bulk uranium waste disposal raises questions with enviros, regulators

N.S. Nokkentved DAILY HERALD

The federal government is eyeing Utah as a place to dispose of 770,000 tons of leftovers from turning natural uranium into reactor fuel and nuclear weapons material.

The federal Energy Department wants to convert the material to a more stable form and dispose of it as waste in Utah at Envirocare.

A proposed facility in New Mexico also wants to process uranium and seeks a place to dispose of similar waste.

Envirocare spokesman Mark Walker said the company, which is seeking approval to expand, has been approached by the New Mexico company, but it has not entered any deals to take the waste. Company vice president Tim Barney was not aware that the Energy Department had selected Envirocare as the preferred disposal site for the waste.

"We have not put in a bid," Walker said.

"This stuff has no business coming here," said Jason Groenewold of Healthy Environment Alliance of Utah.

Several nuclear watchdog groups note that the material is not appropriate for shallow land burial as is contemplated at Envirocare.

Such disposal would result in radiation doses at the surface 100 times the limits allowed by law.

The material, though still radioactive, is called depleted uranium because most of the isotope of uranium used for bombs or for power reactors has been removed.

It is very dense, not highly radioactive and has been used to make tank armor and armor piercing ammunition used in the Iraq War and in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Utah and the federal government considers it Class A low-level radioactive waste -- the least dangerous and least radioactive waste. Envirocare has disposed of depleted uranium in the past, but never in such quantities.

Groenewold is concerned that the state has not questioned the safety of disposing of such large amounts of waste.

"Bulk quantities of depleted uranium have all the characteristics of radioactive waste that must be disposed of in deep geological repository," Groenewold said.

When inhaled or ingested, uranium particles inside the body can produce tumors, birth defects, neurological damage, genetic mutations and cell damage.

Uranium takes a long time to lose its radioactivity. The result of radioactive decay, however, produces other elements that are more radioactive for a short period.

Dane Finerfrock, director of the Division of Radiation Control, verified that depleted uranium is considered Class A low-level radioactive waste, and that the disposal cells at Envirocare are designed to handle such waste at maximum concentrations.

In a telephone conversation with Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials in February, Utah regulators said they had no reservations about accepting the uranium as waste, and that there were no volume restrictions on such waste in Envirocare's license.

Envirocare's recent effort to expand had nothing to do with the government's proposal to dispose of large amounts of depleted uranium, Barney said.

Groenewold doesn't buy it.

"Envirocare did not provide any details about this proposal when seeking approval to double in size, because they knew it would be unacceptable to the citizens of this state," he said.

Barney denied the accusation.

Preliminary approval of Envirocare's expansion has been appealed. The company still needs final approval from the state Legislature and the governor. Envirocare would only accept such waste if it were within the limits of its license.

"We would only take it if it were within the concentration limits of our Class A license," Barney said. "If it's not Class A, then we're clearly not interested."

At the urging of environmental groups, the NRC has decided to take another look at whether existing disposal classifications are appropriate for large quantities of bulk depleted uranium.

N.S. Nokkentved can be reached at 344-2930 or at nnokkentved@heraldextra.com. This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page D1.

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