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Federal Government Says License Application Is Incomplete, Highlighting Folly of West Texas Radioactive Waste Dump Proposal

WCS Application Lacks Needed Storage Cask Safety and Site Security Information

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The federal government’s conclusion that Waste Control Specialists’ (WCS) omitted key safety and security information from its license application for a high-level radioactive waste dump at its Andrews County site in Texas highlights the dangers of the proposal, Public Citizen and SEED Coalition said today.

WCS seeks to expand its existing low-level waste site to take high-level radioactive waste from across the country. If approved, spent fuel rods from nuclear reactors around the country would be transported to Texas and stored for 40 years or longer, risking the possibility of creating a de-facto permanent disposal facility.

In a June 22 letter to WCS, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) determined that the license application for the proposed West Texas high-level radioactive waste storage site lacks sufficient technical information, including information regarding storage cask safety and how the site would be secured. WCS’ response is due in late July. The NRC can then decide whether or not to accept the application for technical review.

“WCS failed to provide a lot of the information required by the NRC to assure this is a safe site. Why should we trust a company that can’t get its paperwork complete to safely construct and operate a facility that could hold up to 40,000 metric tons of lethal nuclear reactor waste for 40 or more years?” asked Tom “Smitty” Smith, director of Public Citizen’s Texas office. The NRC also pointed out that WCS had failed to look at cumulative impacts of the radioactivity from contributions not only from the proposed facility but also other facilities in the region. WCS operates a “low-level” and a federal radioactive waste site at their same Andrews County location and LES operates a reprocessing facility nearby.

“The NRC pointed out many holes in the WCS license application, some involving important safety issues. WCS was asked to explain in detail how they would inspect radioactive waste canisters for damage when they’re received,” said Karen Hadden, executive director of SEED Coalition. “The company’s application said that casks will be visually inspected, but more information was requested by the NRC about the equipment, procedures and monitoring systems that would be used. These processes are needed to assure shielding from radiation and that waste remains confined. The plans can’t be half-baked.”

The proposed high-level radioactive waste site is located on the border of Texas and New

Mexico, near the Ogallala Aquifer. The NRC asked for more information about WCS' water diversion berms and how aquifer contamination would be prevented.

The NRC also said that:

- The application lacks adequate information about how accidents involving radioactive waste storage casks would be prevented.
- The application doesn't account for degradation of the canisters
- Details are needed regarding the site's emergency plan.
- Current information about the vegetation and wildlife near the site is lacking,
- More information is needed projections of population growth and predicted demographics of local communities.
- More information is needed regarding the site's weather assessment and water diversion berms in relation to flooding.
- The application said that temperatures can reach 110 degrees, but some casks list a normal ambient temperature range up to 101 degrees F.

"Not only is the application incomplete, but it's also premature," said Hadden. "Since no one wants radioactive waste in their backyard, the Department of Energy - DOE - is looking for communities to "volunteer" to take it. The agency is still developing a "consent-based siting" process for radioactive waste storage and disposal. They've held six meetings elsewhere, but never talked to people in targeted Texas / New Mexico communities or held a hearing in either state." Based on the fact that Andrews County Commissioners agreed to WCS' plan last year, it is often assumed that people there have consented to receiving the waste, but residents of the 11,000-person city never got to vote."

"Dumping the most dangerous radioactive waste on largely Hispanic communities that do not consent and lack resources to fight back is extreme environmental injustice," said Hadden. The targeted communities didn't generate the waste or benefit from the electricity produced. Why should they get dumped by the whole country now and have to suffer with health-threatening waste in their backyard? "

WCS' plan would likely involve more than 10,000 shipments of radioactive waste generated across much of the United States over 20 or more years. One DOE report found that a radiation release could render 42 square miles uninhabitable and that it could cost more than \$9.5 billion to raze and rebuild a single square mile of a major city's downtown area. A 2014 Texas state report said that "spent nuclear fuel is more vulnerable to sabotage or accidents during transport than in storage because there are fewer security guards and engineered barriers, and that the consequences could be higher since the waste could travel through large cities."

"This week two trains in Texas collided head on, creating a huge fireball and causing at least two deaths. What would have happened if one of these trains had been hauling radioactive waste?" asked Hadden.

“The incomplete WCS license application to store high-level radioactive waste from around the country reflects disregard for people throughout Texas who would be put at radioactive risk,” said Tom “Smitty” Smith. “Andrews County Commissioners should rescind their approval of this project and only reconsider it if and when WCS can prove they can handle this waste safely.’

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