

Nuclear power: Recycling a bad idea



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Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant is being decommissioned. recorder file photo

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Nuclear industry advocates always seem to come up with grand ideas that nuclear power will “solve” our energy problems. Now it’s a solution to climate change. Their solutions always downplay any problems with high-level nuclear waste claiming that nuclear power is safe and finding a solution for its toxic waste is easy. If it’s so easy, why don’t they have a workable solution? Is it really just peoples’ unreasonable fears that obstruct the industry and the federal government from creating a final solution?

Originally we were told that there was no waste problem because the waste would be reprocessed and used again in bombs and new “breeder” reactors. That idea failed! Miserably! The only reprocessing facility for commercial nuclear waste that ever existed was **West Valley** in upstate New York and it shuttered after only five years because it contaminated the land and water around it with radiation. It remains a Superfund site to this day. Without the technology to safely reprocess it, nuclear fuel waste remains in fuel pools and dry storage at reactor sites all over the country.

Because of the threat of nuclear proliferation, where the waste is stolen and used as bomb material by evil forces, President Jimmy Carter ended the research on reprocessing and breeder reactors. Suddenly there was a “waste problem.” Carter commissioned a study to determine the best way to deal with the problem. The level of naivety, arrogance and thoughtlessness is remarkable. Some of the ideas included sending the waste into space, but a payload accident could contaminate the planet; placing the waste in a hole in Antarctica or Greenland ice and letting it melt down into the ocean bed was considered, but the waste would contaminate the ocean. Carter’s commission finally settled on deep geological burial in a hole or an abandoned mine.

All this was codified under the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act (NWPA). Once established, investigations began to determine the best dump site/s. But every state that was identified as a potential site for a repository threatened to sue. Instituting the NWPA was in crisis. The NWPA was amended and Congress targeted Yucca Mountain because Nevada had little political clout at the time.

After spending \$14 billion of taxpayer money developing Yucca Mountain, it failed to meet the necessary criteria for safe isolation of the deadly material. With the failure of the federal government and the nuclear industry to establish Yucca Mountain as the national repository for nuclear waste, nuclear corporations were forced to establish onsite storage at their operating and shuttered reactor sites. Six out of nine reactors in New England have shuttered due to significant public opposition and their inability to compete with gas and renewables. These six sites are in varying degrees of cleanup. Without a “solution” as to dealing with the nuclear waste, these sites have devolved into ad hoc nuclear waste dumps. All have created onsite storage for their high level waste. It costs a lot to store the waste onsite — at least \$5 million out of pocket for each year. This waste could remain onsite for decades if not centuries. So costs could really add up for corporations without any revenue. Naivety, arrogance, and thoughtlessness add up to a lot of money!

With waste piling up at shuttered reactor sites throughout the country, the industry has a perception problem. This is not a favorable image for an industry trying to reinvent itself as the answer to global warming. So what's the industry's answer? It wants to create "interim storage" dump sites in west Texas and New Mexico in working poor, Hispanic communities to make this problem disappear. These sites don't have to meet the strict environmental standards that sunk Yucca Mountain— i.e., isolation from the environment for 1,000 years and isolation from groundwater for 10,000 years.

This "interim storage" initiative is a statement of the failure of the nuclear industry and the federal government to address the most toxic waste we have ever created. We don't need more nukes; we don't need half baked "solutions". We need a commitment to put our best minds to solve this thorny problem. What is needed is a scientifically sound and environmentally just solution, not more magic or wish fulfillment. A qualified "panel" must be established and funded to create the standards required to meet the health and safety of the public and the planet, not the profit-driven, short-sighted monetary bottom line of a moribund industry.

Deb Katz is the executive director of the Citizens Awareness Network, which was founded locally in 1991 and has offices in Shelburne Falls and Rowe. Here's a link to our website www.nukebusters.org.